SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

SEPTEMBER

15¢

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG [illegible] PAGE MAGAZINE

DEATH FOLLOWS THE MAD WOLFER
GRIPPING NOVEL OF COWLAND FEUDISTS
by WALT COBURN

BULLWHIP GOES TO HELL!
SMASHING BILL McCRACKIN NOVEL
by TOM ROAN

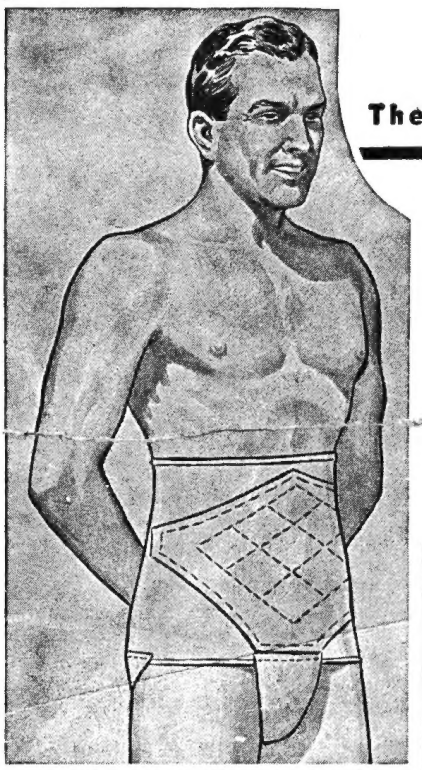
GUN SONG OF SALVATION VAL[illegible]
VIVID NOVEL OF OUT[illegible]
by WILLIAM BENTON JO[illegible]

THOUSANDS of MEN NOW

Appear SLIMMER — Feel BETTER — Look YOUNGER

with Commander

The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE

The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET

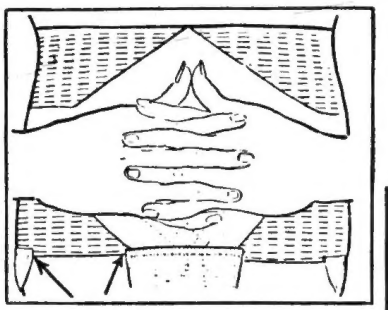
The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER

The COMMANDER braces your figure, your posture becomes erect . . . you look and feel [illegible] . . . you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!

The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch, with fly-front opening. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!



MAKE THIS TEST ➡ WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

* THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A special non-stretch material is built into the Two-way stretch body of the COMMANDER. STRETCHES 10 to 14 INCHES HIGH . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most

Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."

Dr. A. M. S.
Standish, Mich.

★ "Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."

Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

★ "Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another.

J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

★ "I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."

P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

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(Send string the size of waist if measuring tape is not available.)

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ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

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Wear COMMANDER ten days FREE. If it fails to do all we say, send it back and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

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I TRAINED THESE MEN

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$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time.—JOHN JERRY, 1729 Penn St., Denver, Colorado.

Radio Technician at Ordnance Works

I am now Chief Radio Technician at ..... Ordnance Works and very pleased with my new position. If I had not taken the N. R. I. Course I might be digging ditches or perhaps unemployed. —R. S. LEWIS (Address omitted for military reasons.)

$200 a Month in Own Business

For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field. —ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Avenue, Goose Creek, Texas.

WHY MANY RADIO TECHNICIANS MAKE $30, $40, $50, A WEEK

The Radio repair business is booming as manufacturers have stopped making new sets and the country's 57,400,000 home and auto sets are becoming older, needing more repairs, new tubes, parts. This is opening new opportunities for full time and part time Radio Technicians to get good jobs, or to open their own Radio repair businesses. Radio Technicians and Operators hold good jobs in the country's 882 Broadcasting Stations and in Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine and Government Radio. Loud Speaker Systems give good jobs to many. The Government is calling for Civilian Radio Technicians and Operators. Government orders for millions of dollars worth of Radio equipment offer opportunities in Radio factories. Men with Radio Training are in line for extra rank and pay in the Army and Navy. Many Radio developments such as Television, held back by the war, will make Radio a live-wire field for the future.

BEGINNERS SOON LEARN TO EARN $5, $10 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME

Due to the boom in the Radio repair business, practically every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for conducting experiments and building test equipment to help you do better, faster Radio repair work. My 50-50 method—half working with Radio parts I send you, half studying lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, gives you valuable practical experience.

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National Radio Institute, Dept. 2JS9
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TRAINING MEN FOR VITAL RADIO JOBS

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MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2JS9
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

OCTOBER ISSUE ★ PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 4th!

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-SEVEN SEPTEMBER, 1942 NUMBER FOUR

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

DEATH FOLLOWS THE MAD WOLFER.....*WALT COBURN* **10**

That strangely sinister figure called the Wolfer lived up to his name as the most treacherous man in the Montana cow-country when he offered young Tom Paul half a dozen mangy coyote pelts—at a thousand dollars a piece! . . . . Or a living hell far more merciless than the cruel steel jaws of his hidden wolf traps!

BLOODY WOOL—AND BUCKSHOT!.....*DEE LINFORD* **34**

Jim Tripp had to start from scratch to try to rebuild his murdered dad's sheep empire. . . . Against Dollar Sam's shrewd and ruthless murder combine that paid in hot, bush-whack lead for their pirated woolly bands!

BULLWHIP GOES TO HELL!.....*TOM ROAN* **56**

That bellowing, fast-triggered old hell-bat, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, never figured—when he took the part of a beaten, homeless range-waif—that the button's loyal gratitude would send him to a strange and flaming boothill purgatory!

HOSS GREER'S SIXGUN QUARANTINE....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* **82**

It was up to old Hoss Greer to help enforce that grim hoof-and-mouth deadline in Apache Basin. . . . Until a bunch of mad-dog renegade cowmen chose Hoss to ride point on their infected trail herd—and drive all Arizona from the cattle business!

RED TERROR FOR TEXANS!.....*WILLIAM R. COX* **98**

Sam Poole rode back to Texas, to discover that even the carnage and battle-smoke of Gettysburg would be as nothing to the bloody terror which threatened destruction to every honest rancher in the Lone Star State!

GUN-SONG OF SALVATION VALLEY....*WM. BENTON JOHNSTON* **118**

Could even case-hardened Miles Granberry, gun-runner, and tough drifter, win his desperate gamble against the cold-deck killer boss of Mesa Norte, when in the pot were the lives of the two bravest—and most helpless—people Miles had ever known?

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* **6**

Was a quick draw the best insurance against boothill? Here's the place to state your views, and spin your yarns about any part of the Frontier!

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* **138**

Your bred-in-the-bone cowpuncher knew the true value of the freedom we're fighting for today!

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1942, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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A cost clerk, J. S. H. became, after completing 30 training assignments, cost accountant. Within nine months, only half through the course, he became chief cost accountant with a salary nearly four times what it was when he enrolled. C. K. was an immigrant day laborer. Within a few months he secured a bookkeeping job. Within a year, he secured three raises. In two years, he was in charge of his company's accounting department, although not yet through the training. W. J. F. moved up from store clerk to assistant bookkeeper after the first ten lessons. Now he is office manager. S. W. N. knew nothing about bookkeeping. With 19 months of training he passed the C. P. A. examination on first attempt and opened his own public accounting office. Although a university graduate, P. M. was a grocery clerk at small wages. Today he is Secretary and Credit Manager with an income 300 per cent higher. Already in cost work, G. N. P. within nine months was earning 40% more; within two years, 100% more. The third year his income went up still more Now he is manager.

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Present Position.....

Address.....*City and State*.....

The Branding Corral

Conducted by Strawboss

Pilgrim or old hand, everyone's welcome to gather round the embers of the branding fire at sunset and swap good talk. . . .

BACK in the days when all good Texas cowboys used to go to San 'Tone when they died, a couple of wild young brush-poppers renewed acquaintance on a remote Border spread after a year's separation. One started to tell of the wonders of that cow-country capital where, he claimed, he'd spent a year's wages in less than a week.

"You never saw so many bright lights or pretty gals as they got in Jack Harris's Theater!" he boasted. "The stage there's as big as half this county, an' the gals don't do nothin' but sing an' dance an' wear the gayest spangles you ever did see. They got a bar, too, where they serve you drinks that ain't only whiskey-color, but purple an' green an' yeller. Why, at Jack Harris's Theater—"

"Shucks!" said his friend. "I was to San 'Tone, too, last Fall, and I never did hear of such a locoed place. But there's a place called the Green Front where I see Ben Thompson himself come in an' take a drink as quiet as you please. They spread gold pesos around like a drunk cook spreads raisins in a pudding. There's a señorita there called La Paloma who plays the fiddle, an' . . . ."

As each cowpuncher insisted on further championing his pet place of amusement, the argument became hotter, until each accused the other of never having visited San 'Tone at all.

Such talk was naturally backed by swinging fists, and after the two erstwhile friends picked themselves up from the dust before the bunkhouse, the former patron of Jack Harris's place scratched his head, felt gently of his swollen left eye, and said:

"Say, I got so all-fired mad that I clean forgot there might be any such place as

(Continued on page 8)

The 97 Pound Weakling

—Who became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

"I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!"

Charles Atlas

I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension."* It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, *"Dynamic Tension,"* transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

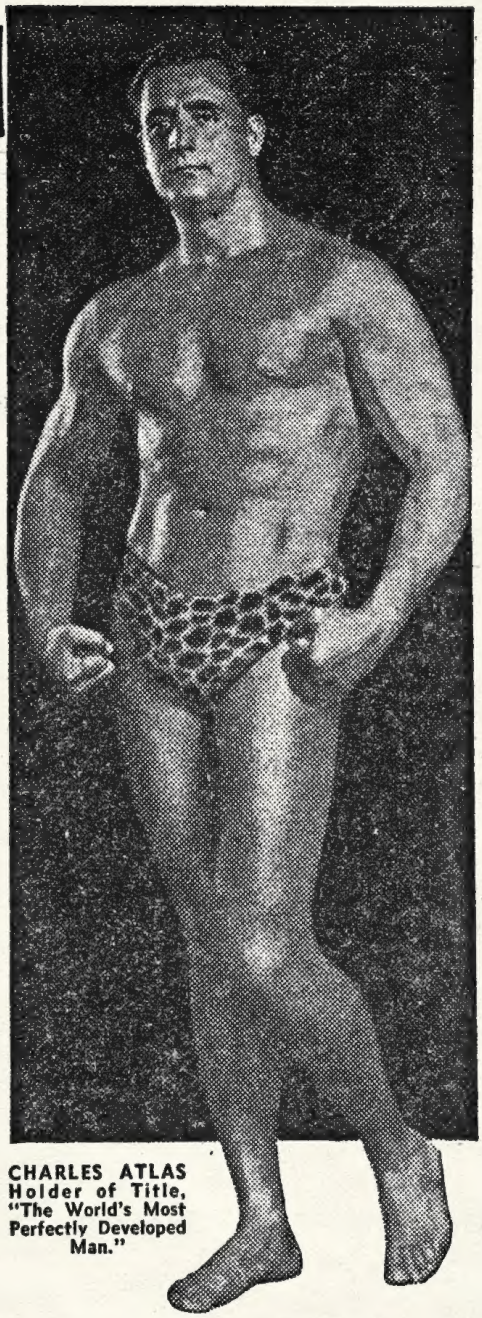
Do you want big, broad shoulders—a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

Send for FREE BOOK

Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my *"Dynamic Tension"* method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83-Y, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.



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Holder of Title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City..... State.....

(Continued from page 6)

the Green Front. The first thing I did after stabling my horse was to go direct to Harris's, an' I never did leave until I was too broke to go anywhere but out of town."

The other grinned, holding out his hand. "We'll try Jack Harris's an' the Green Front both next time," he promised. "Seems like I saw all the seven wonders of the world right there in the bar—an' I never thought of tryin' to find out if the town had any other place. Pardner, I reckon San 'Tone's just too big a mouthful to chaw an' swaller in one chunk!"

Well, according to *Mr. Jack Newhall,* of San Francisco, a good many Western fiction magazines are like those two brush-popping rannies who found the cow-country Mecca a pretty large order to take in all at once. And it seems to us that Mr. Newhall makes out a pretty good case for both himself and the frontier in general:

Dear Strawboss:

I'll be the first to admit the large part which the early cattle industry played in the development of our West, and also I'll grant you that it has always had —and still does have—plenty of glamor and adventure about it. But what bothers me is that the folks who read Western fiction today are apt to get the impression that nothing much of importance or interest occurred on the frontier that didn't happen on the cattle-range or in the cow-towns.

I think that this is a mistake. My great-grandfather was one of the original Argonauts who came out here in a covered wagon in '49. Another great grand-dad, on my mother's side shipped around the Horn and with the other members of the crew abandoned their ship to rot in San Francisco harbor, to go dig for gold. Later, he drove stage between San Francisco and Hangtown, was shotgun messenger for Wells, Fargo during the days when more than one road-agent gallantly bowed to the stage passengers and offered each a drink of brandy, after looting the stage strong-box.

Truly, "there were giants in those days," and among them rose the impressive figure of the stage driver—even more autocratic than the guard, "fortified," as they used to say, with shotgun, revolver and repeating rifle.

The driver was a resplendent personage on every count, and well did he realize that fact and make the most of it. He occupied a position of skill, responsibility and sheer grandeur that today might roughly be compared to that of a commander of a battle fleet and top-notch fighter pilot combined.

They had little enough respect for the garden-run of mankind, and none whatever for mere passengers, considering the risks they took each trip from Indian arrows and bandit bullets, as well as from tooling an eight-horse team, treasure and human freight over the narrow, tortuous mountain passes, they were perhaps closer to God than most.

The driver who could chop a few minutes from a trip, though he arrived at his destination with the harness a wreck, the Concord itself battered, and the passengers frightened literally out of their clothes, had done his job well.

They tell the story of one famous driver on the Shasta route who, resplendent in red waistcoat, yellow pants and duster and white beaver hat, never left the bar until he had to be assisted to the waiting stage and passed from hand to hand up to the box. Once there, however, with the silver-mounted whip in his gloved hand and the other holding the reins, he abruptly shed his intoxication and was thoroughly master of the situation.

So great became his reputation for

(Continued on page 139)

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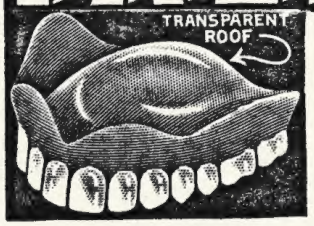

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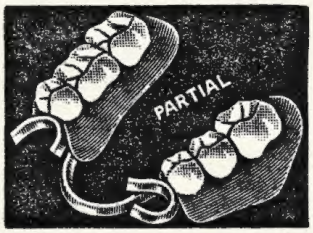

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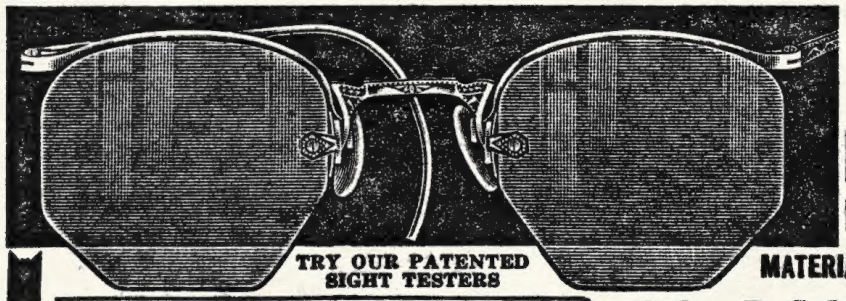

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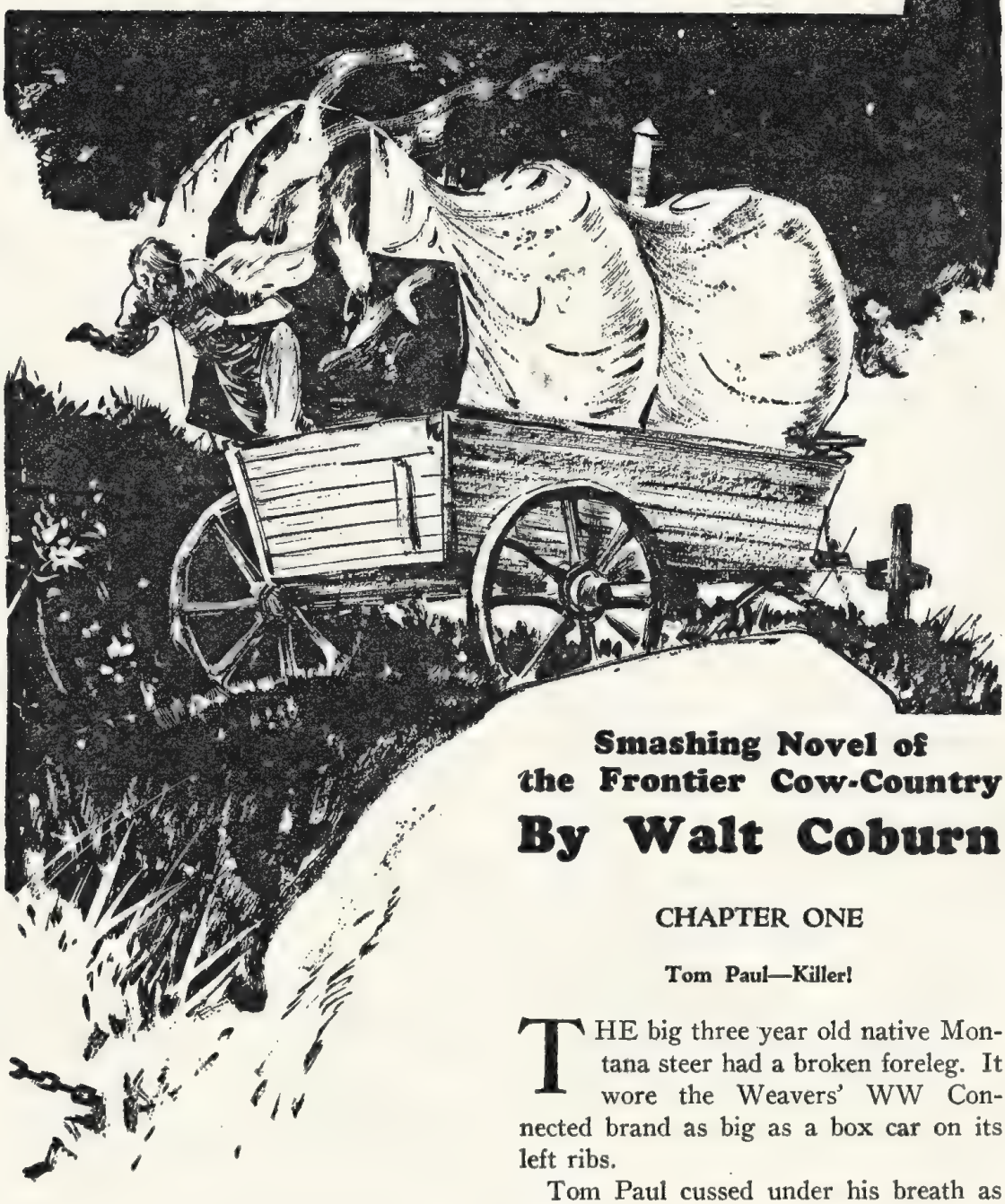
Death Follows the Mad Wolfer

Tom threw himself down on the ground. . . .

Young Tom Paul stood with a smoking gun in his hand and a half sick feeling in his stomach, looking at the first man he'd ever killed. . . . How could he know that the skulking, shifty-eyed Wolfer had already marked him as a pawn in the strangest game of blackmail and brand-blot murder ever to be written on the bloodstained pages of the lawless cattle frontier?



Smashing Novel of the Frontier Cow-Country

By Walt Coburn

CHAPTER ONE

Tom Paul—Killer!

THE big three year old native Montana steer had a broken foreleg. It wore the Weavers' WW Connected brand as big as a box car on its left ribs.

Tom Paul cussed under his breath as he slid his six-shooter from its holster

and rode close. Red-eyed, skinned up, strings of slobber coming from its open mouth, the steer was in a bad way. Some cowpuncher had been practicing roping and had busted this one too hard. This was Tom Paul's P Quarter Circle range and the Weaver brothers hated his guts.

Tom Paul's six-shooter cracked. He'd get a couple of Indians from the nearby reservation to butcher the steer. The meat would be tough and stringy but Injuns didn't mind. They'd leave the hide here where they butchered.

The Weavers would raise hell, of course, and charge Tom Paul twice what the beef steer would bring on the market. But a crippled animal like this had to be put out of its misery, regardless.

The sound of the shot brought a lone rider poking up over a near-by hill—like he'd been waiting there for just that to happen. The rider was no more than a few hundred yards away, and for a second or two Tom Paul thought grimly that the man was the one who had been doing some plain and fancy roping. Then he recognized the rider, and prepared for the worst. Because it was Sid Weaver, and Sid rode like he was drunk and on the prod.

The lanky, rawboned Sid Weaver was cussing as he rode up. He had a gun in his hand.

"I sighted that crippled steer of ourn, Paul," Weaver yelled. "I'll learn you and them hungry-loop cowhands of yourn to chouse an' cripple our cattle. You've busted your last steer!"

And with no more than that, Sid Weaver's gun was spitting fire. His first shot missed, but the second bullet creased Tom Paul's ribs with a searing, ripping pain.

Tom Paul jerked his six-shooter and opened up as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger. He did not quit shooting until Sid Weaver's horse whirled and pitched and the lanky cowman landed heavily on his head and shoulders and lay there on his back, one leg bent. The sun blazed down into his unwinking dead eyes.

Tom Paul stood there on his long bowed legs, staring at the dead man, the smoke thinning from the end of his gun-barrel. This was the first time in his young life that he had ever used a gun on a man. Now he had killed Sid Weaver. The shock of it left him numb.

Tom's faded, dusty flannel shirt was reddening with blood from his grazed ribs, but he only felt a sort of numb shock and horror. He was no cold-blooded killer, and now that that first searing anger had cooled, he felt like he was in the grip of some nightmare. That it was all a bad dream, and that he'd wake up in a minute, bathed in cold sweat.

He hardly heard the rattle of chain harness and the creak of wagon wheels. Tom's dark gray eyes were a little blank when he looked up and saw the man on the seat of a canvas-covered wagon drawn by a team of stout mules, a wagon built like a freight caboose and rigged with bunk and stove and cupboards.

The man's legs and arms were long, lanky and big jointed. His lean, lantern-jawed face, tanned and unwashed and marred by a stubble of graying, dead-colored hair, was leathery. His huge nose hooked down over a lipless, tobacco-stained mouth. His deep-set eyes were yellow.

"Looks like you done done it, Tom Paul. That's what's left of Sid Weaver, ain't it?"

He spat a stream of tobacco juice over the front wheel. His twisted grin was mirthless.

"I'd make that out fer a WW on that steer's ribs. From what I kin make of it, Sid rode up on you whilst you was a-butcherin' one of their WW steers. Them Weaver boys is ornery. You kill one, you gotta kill the other two. Or mebbyso Reap an' Tal Weaver will turn it over to the Law."

THE man had a sharp nasal voice that matched the cunning and cruelty of his yellow eyes and twisting, lipless mouth. His teeth were blackish stumps.

Perhaps the man had a name, but if so, it had been forgotten. A dozen steel traps that hung by their chains outside his wagon advertised his calling. He trapped coyotes and wolves and mountain lions for the bounty their pelts would fetch. Drifting across the cow country, a wolfer by trade, he was called Wolfer—and the name fitted him! His clothes and wagon reeked of fresh and rancid pelts.

"A jury of them twelve good men *and* true," he went on, "a-settin' on your case as I kin read it, will hang you higher than a damned kite, young gobbler. Sid Weaver ketched you butcherin' a WW beef and you killed him." Wolfer's laugh was like the sound made by a rattle weed. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down in his skinny bearded throat.

Tom Paul shivered a little, though the setting sun was still hot in the blue sky. He shoved his empty six-shooter back into its holster. He felt at the mercy of this Wolfer, who now climbed down over the wagon wheel and stretched his seven-foot length.

Wolfer was the tallest man in that part of the Montana cow country. And the most treacherous.

"Me'n you," he grinned at the young cowman, "might do business. You're too young to hang. And I hear that daddy of yourn left you the P Quarter Circle when he cashed in his chips. The talk is that it mighta bin the Weaver boys that bushwhacked ol' John Paul. Account of the drift fence defugalty and the water rights to Cold Springs. Which'd like as not tally ag'in you in the John Law's court."

Wolfer's yellow eyes swept the rolling hills. "Nary a soul in sight. Me'n my mules is the only eye witnesses. And I never yet heard a army mule testify in court." His ugly laugh rattled.

Wolfer carried a curved bladed skinning knife in a rawhide scabbard fastened to his cartridge belt. He knelt beside the dead steer and with a few swift, skilled rips he cut out the section of hide with the WW brand, then the steer's ears with the Weaver underslope and overbit earmarks. He shoved the strip of hide and ears into the pocket of his old grease-glazed buckskin coat.

"Fork your horse, young Paul. Drag it fer home. Lemme take care of this. Half an hour from now there'll be nothin' but the grass from the steer's paunch and guts to show a beef's bin butchered. Like an Injun job. And Sid Weaver's dead carcass will be found a long ways from here, over on the WW range."

Wolfer leered and winked. "I'll drop by the P Quarter Circle ranch some time and sell you some wolf pelts. Now git along. I work lone-handed. Git fer home and keep your lip buttoned tight."

Tom Paul's ribs ached with a throbbing pain, and blood from the bullet rip was oozing down into his pants. He was sick inside from shock and reaction. And fear had his heart in a clammy grip. He had killed a man. If the Law did not hang him, Reap and Tal Weaver would shoot him where they found him. This Wolfer was offering him a way out.

It made Tom Paul feel like a miserable spineless coward to connive with that leering, cackling, yellow-eyed trapper. But right now it seemed the only ray of hope in a world that had suddenly blackened like a storm cloud around him.

Tom Paul mounted his horse and rode away. As he topped the ridge and looked back he could see Wolfer skinning the steer. He saw the dead man's horse, stripped of its bridle and blanket and saddle, headed for the WW ranch at a trot. There was no sign at all of Sid Weaver's body. Tom Paul shivered and rode on into

the last slanting light of the setting sun.

When Tom Paul reached a creek he bathed and bandaged his bullet-nicked ribs. When he tried to roll a cigarette the paper tore in his unsteady hands, spilling tobacco on the ground.

It was a fifteen-mile ride to the P Quarter Circle ranch. The four cowpunchers who worked for him were down in the badlands branding what calves the round-up had missed. There should be nobody there, but he rode slowly so that it would be plenty dark when he got home.

He had to be alone for a while, until he got hold of himself. Otherwise he would blurt out his ugly secret. He toyed with the notion of riding to town and giving himself up to the sheriff. Telling the truth and taking his chances like a man.

But he was afraid to risk it. His story would sound like some sheepherder's locoed ramblings. And Wolfer had him now in his blood-smeared big hands. Wolfer had crowded Tom into this ugly thing, while he stood there like some half-wit. Yes, he'd crowded Tom into as nasty a mess as ever a man could get into. No backing out of it now. It was too late. Wolfer had taken over the deal. And Tom Paul knew that the cowardly guilt of his share in it would ride him like a black weight of shame till the end of his days.

Wolfer alone shared his coward's secret, and Wolfer would have Tom Paul at his mercy from now on. Wolfer was bad medicine. But the evil odored trapper would never talk so long as Tom Paul paid him well for his silence.

But what about the cowpuncher who had roped that WW steer and crippled it? Maybe other eyes than the yellow eyes of Wolfer had watched Tom Paul shoot Sid Weaver. Cold sweat beaded his tanned face and bathed his body with its clamminess. Fear rode home with him.

That fear changed to wild panic when he rode up to the ranch and saw a light go on inside the bunkhouse. Somebody had just put up his horse and had gone to the bunkhouse.

★

IT WAS too late now to turn back. Nothing left to do now but play it out as best he could, lying about the blood on his shirt and his aching ribs; lie like the miserable coward he was. Wolfer's pardner in crime! He, Tom Paul, had killed a man and hired that long-geared trapper to cover his tracks.

He hoped it was one of his own cowpunchers and not some grubline rider at the bunkhouse. He hoped his little cowpuncher crew were all there. That they'd finished work in the badlands and pulled in at the home ranch. He'd tell them just what had happened, from start to finish.

They were all older than Tom; cowhands hired by Tom's father. Men who were loyal and on the square. It would do Tom good to unburden himself right now.

But it was Curly Greer who hailed him from the bunkhouse door. Curly was a bronc-rider, and a good one. He was the only man who worked for the WW outfit and made himself welcome at the P Quarter Circle ranch.

Because the Weavers and the Paul outfits did not get along, so argued the hoo-rawing bronc-stomper, was no reason for him to pack the Weavers' grudge around with him. He was hired to ride the WW rough string, not to do their fighting.

Yet, for all his loud laughing and his spur-jingling swagger, Curly Greer made no real friends. His practical jokes had made him some enemies. And he was not to be trusted too far. He tried to borrow money from everybody. Those who had been gullible enough to loan him anything never got it back.

Curly Greer was just about the last man on earth that Tom Paul wanted to

see or talk to right now. And the thought struck Tom like a blow in the belly that Curly Greer was always roping off his string of broncs. Making rope horses out of his mounts. Curly was just about the most likely candidate in the country for the crippling of that WW steer.

Curly was waving a bottle. His loud voice made Tom wince inside, as he struck a match and lit the barn lantern.

"I'm a wolf, Tom! A curly black wolf! Eeeee-ow!"

He was weaving his way from the bunkhouse to the barn, howling like a wolf. Big, husky, and swaggering. One of his green-gray eyes was discolored and swollen and his mouth was battered. There was dried blood on his square face, and his knuckles were skinned. He shoved the half empty quart at Tom Paul.

"You know what I done in town, Tom? I quit the WW outfit. You know why I quit, Tom? Because they was goin' to fire me, that's why. You know why they was goin' to fire me, Tom? Because I taken Reap and Tal Weaver by the scruff of their damned necks and I rapped their heads together till them boneheaded skulls popped like a couple of empty gourds. Then I slung 'em out in the street of their two-bit cow town.

"Now I'm on the trail of Sid Weaver. You know why? Because I want to take him by that long beak of his an' cuff him loose from it. And then I think I'll chaw his ears off. Drink hearty, Tom, then tell me where is Sid Weaver."

Curly's last words made Tom Paul choke a little. Then he tipped up the bottle and drank. He swallowed the raw whiskey like water. Tom was not much of a hand to drink, but he figured that whiskey might melt the cold lump in his belly.

"Why," he asked the bronc-twister, "would I know where to locate Sid Weaver?"

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"He was headed for the P Quarter Circle ranch," grinned Curly, "to tromp your guts out. The Weaver boys don't like you, Tom. They didn't like your old man. That's why they hired Wolfer to bushwhack John Paul. . . . Shore thing! Take another drink, Tom. You look like you'd just bin rasslin' a ghost. Drink hearty."

Tom Paul swallowed some more whiskey. His hands were so unsteady that some of the whiskey spilled and the neck of the bottle rattled against his teeth. Perhaps it was his guilty conscience but he thought that Curly was eyeing him with a sort of leering suspicion. But there in the flickering shadowy light of the barn lantern it was hard to read a man's real expression.

Tom took care of his horse and blew out the lantern and they went on to the cook cabin to get something to eat. The whiskey was steadying Tom's nerves. He stopped between the barn and the whitewashed log cook cabin to take another pull at Curly's bottle.

"I got the mate to it," grinned Curly. "Drink hearty. First time I ever knowed you to take to hard likker thataway, Tommy. But you're sure as hell welcome to it. Could it be that there's worry a-gnawin' at you?"

"Worry?" Tom's tone was sharp.

"Girl worry," grinned the husky bronc-rider. "Linda Howard kinda plays the field. Keeps us all a-guessin'. Yeah, Sheriff Hank Howard's daughter Linda collects scalps. The Weaver boys was rollin' high dice for her in town. Sid lost and pulled out to whup you just to git the orneriness out of his system. Reap and Tal was rollin' the dice when I horned into the game. They didn't like me for crowdin' into a private game. Them Weaver boys claim this ain't a free country, that it's all WW range. And they burn their WW brand on everything they claim."

Curly Greer had pulled the cork on another bottle. He was talking a lot. Curly had tried to ride and swagger his way into the heart of Linda Howard. Linda had flirted a little with him, as she did with most of the cowmen and cowboys around that part of the country. Then she'd laughed at him when he got too possessive about it. Curly's pride had suffered.

Linda was like that. She was the prettiest girl in the cow country and she knew it. Tom and Linda had grown up together and they were like brother and sister. Tom was a few years older than Linda and he had championed her since he could remember. He grinned now at Curly Greer. This was safer ground.

He joshed Curly about losing out with Linda, and Curly grinned back at him. But the big spur-jingling bronc-rider was one of those men who like to do all the hoorawing, and now behind his grin his green eyes were cold, but Tom Paul was already too tipsy to see it.

The whiskey was working swiftly on Tom's empty stomach. When Curly said there was no use cooking supper because the grub would take the edge off their little jag, Tom was willing to agree, so they sat there in the kitchen with the whiskey.

Tom wondered if he should tell Curly about the ugly mess he was in. Curly had quit the WW outfit, and would make a ready and sympathetic listener. . . . The liquor was making Tom's brain whirl. He heard himself talking a lot. And then he passed out. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Hang-Noose Candidate

IT WAS after sunrise when Tom woke up. His head felt as if somebody had hit him between the eyes with a double-bitted axe, and his tongue was a chunk of dusty flannel in his mouth. He

was lying on his bunk with his boots off.

He lay there a little while, trying to think with a brain that was still bewildered and fogged. He groaned as he remembered about killing Sid Weaver, and the thought of Wolfer didn't make him feel better. Then he remembered Curly, with his bottle and his skinned face. Had he told that big bronc-rider anything about the killing of Sid Weaver and his ugly meeting with the Wolfer?

Tom swung his legs over the edge of his bunk and looked around. There was no sign of Curly. He washed his head and face in a big basin of cold water and drank three big dippers of cold well water. He taped a fresh bandage on his aching, swollen ribs.

Curly's horse was gone, and the bronc-rider was nowhere around.

Tom watered and saddled his horse and caught up a fresh mount, turning the others back in the pasture. Then he went to the cook cabin and made himself a pot of strong black coffee.

Sight of the two empty whiskey bottles in the kitchen made him shudder. He threw them out. He felt sick and his hands shook. He took a bath in the creek and shaved and put on clean clothes. But he still felt jumpy and uneasy and kept watching the skyline for riders.

He wished he had somebody to talk to, somebody he could trust. But he was all alone with his dismal hangover and brooding worries. Something like panic was clawing at him with invisible hands, and he had a feeling that something ugly was going to happen to him before sundown.

He kept trying to remember what he and Curly had talked about last night, but his memory was blurred and his head ached. The urge to ride off into the badlands and hide out there was prodding him in the back.

He got a saddle carbine and a box of .30-30 cartridges and took them to the barn. He had saddled the best ridge runner in his string. Now he hung around the barn and waited for he knew not what, watching the road from town.

He was waiting for Sheriff Hank Howard to ride up with a bench warrant, waiting for Reap and Tal Weaver to come gunning for him. Waiting for the Wolfer to drive up in his covered wagon to move in on the ranch and camp here. And he waited for Curly Greer to show up. It was almighty queer that Curly had pulled out without even waking him this morning.

The sun was noon high, but Tom Paul was not hungry enough to get himself dinner. He sat in the shade of the barn after he had watered his horse. Whittling and smoking. His ribs ached and the bandage itched his hide. He was restless and hounded by what he had done, the thing he had let the Wolfer get away with, what the Law would do to him.

"Oh, hell," he told himself, rubbing out the coal of a half-smoked cigarette, "I'm a rank yellow-bellied coyote coward. Sid Weaver come at me cussin' and shootin'. I killed him in self-defense."

Letting the Wolfer cover up his trail was Tom's only mistake. He had a hangover and that's what ailed him. He'd ride to town and give himself up to Sheriff Hank Howard.

Tom Paul had reached that decision and was already beginning to grin at himself for a panicky-brained bonehead when he sighted the smoke of a campfire. It came from the Black Alkali Springs about a mile and a half from the ranch. It was a lot of smoke for a cook fire.

The Wolfer might have a fire like that going if he was curing pelts. He used some sort of a smoke process to soften a pelt or antelope or deer hide he had fleshed and was going to tan and sell. Some Indian method. . . . Yes, that would be the Wolfer's smoke.

Nobody but the Wolfer would camp at Black Alkali Springs. The water was

crystal clear but bitter as quinine. Surrounding it was a black bog where a man or horse or cow would sink out of sight. It made a good place to sink a beef hide with the brand cut out. A beef carcass.... Or the dead body of a man.

Black Alkali Springs was on the P Quarter Circle range. It looked like the Wolfer had moved in on Tom Paul.

Tom led his horse out of the barn and tightened the saddle cinch. He shoved a carbine into the saddle scabbard and emptied the box of .30-30 cartridges into his pockets. He'd ride over there and have it out, once and for all, with the Wolfer. The quicker he got it over with, the better it would suit him.

Tom was swinging into his saddle when he saw the rapidly approaching dust cloud on the road that led from town. Grimly he stared at it as four riders appeared out of the yellow dust. His heart pounded hard, sending the blood into his throat and aching head.

In the lead rode Sheriff Hank Howard and Curly Greer. Behind them rode Tal and Reap Weaver. They were traveling at a road trot. The sheriff and the two Weavers packed saddle guns. And though Curly sat his horse with a defiant saddle swagger, Tom Paul had a notion that the bronc-rider was under arrest.

Curly himself broke the bad news with a grinning flash of his big white teeth, as they reined up in front of the barn.

"Tell these hombres where I was last night, Tom. They got me charged with murderin' Sid Weaver."

"We rode up on 'im," said Reap Weaver. "Me'n Tal. He was robbin' Sid's pockets."

"After he'd shot Sid in the back," snarled Tal. "Hell, nobody kin alibi you, mister. We ketched you red-handed."

Reap and Tal were younger duplicates of the dead Sid—an ugly looking pair. Both showed the marks of the beating Curly Greer had given them.

IF CURLY had been drunk last night, he had sobered up in good shape. His eyes were a little bloodshot but his hands were steady as he spilled tobacco into a brown paper. He lit a match on his thumbnail, lit the cigarette and let the smoke drift from his nostrils and mouth when he spoke.

"I found Sid Weaver's dead body between here and the WW ranch, laid out in the broad middle of the trail in the gray daybreak. He was so dead he'd quit bleeding, and his head was pillowed on a fresh beef hide that was rolled with the hair side out. The brand had been cut out of the hide.

"Like I told the sheriff, I was fixin' to take a good look at that beef hide when Reap and Tal rode up outa the brush with their guns pointed at my belly. Like they'd bin bushed up there a-waitin' for somebody like me to come along. Me or you, Tom. Them Weavers don't like you any more than they like me. They was gittin' ready to kill me when Sheriff Hank Howard come ridin' along the trail. The sheriff ain't told me what fetched him away from town early before breakfast. Mebbyso he—"

"Dry up, Curly," said Sheriff Hank Howard quietly. "You run off at the head like a magpie with a split tongue."

The sheriff had a soft, quiet voice and an easy way of handling things. He tugged at his drooping gray mustache, and his puckered blue eyes looked at Tom Paul with sharp scrutiny.

"I hope you ain't mixed up in this, Tom."

Reap and Tal Weaver were scowling at him. Tom saw Curly grinning twistedly.

"Curly didn't kill Sid Weaver," Tom said flatly. "Curly was here at dark last night. He stayed late. I don't know how long because I got drunk and passed out. But he didn't kill Sid."

Tom Paul was no longer afraid. That panic that had gripped him was gone. But

he wasn't blurting out any kind of a confession with Reap and Tal Weaver staring at him with bloodshot, hostile eyes. With Curly Greer grinning at him like he knew too much.

Whatever fear he had felt was now turned to cold anger. He sat his horse with his weight in one stirrup and grinned faintly at the sheriff. Hank Howard was the best friend Tom had in the world. Hank wasn't crowding him into a tight.

"Is that the Wolfer's smoke," drawled the sheriff, pointing with a gloved hand, "yonder at Black Alkali Springs?"

"I was just ridin' over there to find out," Tom told him quietly.

"We'll all ride over," said Hank Howard. "I'm curious to see just how the Wolfer's fixed for beef."

Tom Paul cut a quick look at Curly. Curly's swollen, discolored left eye closed in a meaning wink. Tom knew now that he must have talked too much last night to the burly bronc-twister.

When Tom's glance shifted to the two Weavers he saw them swap quick, uneasy looks.

"What the hell," growled Reap Weaver, "has the Wolfer got to do with it? Anybody kin see that Curly Greer and Tom Paul is in cahoots on this. If you want the beef to go with that hide we found with Sid, take a look in Tom Paul's meat house. Like as not Sid rode up on 'em when they was butcherin' a WW beef and they killed him. Take a look in the meat house, Tal."

"Have at it," said Tom Paul flatly. "You'll find a hind quarter hung up there. It's plenty high. Bin hung a couple of weeks. . . ."

Tal Weaver loped over to the log meat house and swung to the ground. He opened the door and went inside. Then he stepped out again. There was an ugly grin on his lantern-jawed face as he waved his arm.

Tom Paul's belly tightened into a hard, cold knot. They rode over to the meat house and looked in through the open door. Tom knew now what he would see. Four fresh quarters of beef hung on the meat hooks.

"You got the hide to go with that meat, Tom?" asked the sheriff.

Tom shook his head. While he was dead drunk last night the Wolfer had put that butchered beef in his meat house. Tom cut a hard look at Curly Greer.

Curly's eye winked. The big bronc-stomper was warning him to silence and denying at the same time the hard, bitter accusation in Tom Paul's eyes.

"Shut that meat house door, Tal," grinned Curly, "before the blow-flies git to it. Seen all you wanted, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Hank Howard nodded. He said they'd better ride on over and have a talk with the Wolfer, regardless.

"Whenever that long-geared, stinkin' thing shows up," Hank Howard said, "there's a killin'. Last time it was John Paul. Now it's Sid Weaver."

"You got the two men right here," snarled Reap Weaver. "What you want to bother the Wolfer for? Jail Tom Paul and Curly Greer and you got the right men."

"We're ridin' over," said the sheriff quietly," to augur with the Wolfer. Come along, all of you."

CHAPTER THREE

Brand Pirates

THE Wolfer had a few coyote pelts strung on green willow frames and hanging in the smoke of his fire. He had a long pole in his hand and was poking something down into the rank smelling black bog.

There was a leering grin on his bearded face as he straightened up and spat a stream of tobacco juice at the bubbling black mud.

"I was sinkin' some coyote carcasses," he volunteered.

His yellow eyes took them all in and finally looked at Tom Paul. He rubbed his scraggly beard with the calloused palm of his big hand as if to hide a leering grin.

Then the Wolfer spoke to Hank Howard. "What kin I do fer the Law this bright and sunny day?"

"Take his prod pole, Tom," said the sheriff. "Poke around in the mud. See if you kin fish out a hunk of hide about so big."

He measured with his two hands. "It'll have the WW brand on its hairy side."

Tom Paul stepped off his horse. The sheriff was dismounting and stepping up into the covered wagon.

"Hold your nose, Sheriff," called Curly, "that outfit would stink a buzzard off."

"I'll sell you them five coyote pelts that's curin'," the Wolfer spoke to Tom Paul in a barely audible tone. "Cheap. A thousand dollars a pelt."

"Yeah?" Tom forced a flat lipped grin.

"And I'll testify in court that Curly Greer killed Sid Weaver and hung that WW beef in your meat house last night while you was dead drunk. Is it a deal?"

There was a leering grin on his bearded face. He stood there like some foul scarecrow, leaning on the long prod pole.

All the torturing dread that had been warping Tom Paul's bewildered brain now changed into a blinding red rage.

He reached out with both hands and grabbed the long pole, yanked it free from the Wolfer's loose grip and flung it away. Then before the seven-foot Wolfer could defend himself Tom was tearing into him like a bulldog tackling a lanky, gaunt wolf, ripping in short, savage lefts and rights. The blows traveled only a short distance but all of Tom Paul's hundred and eighty-five pounds of long bone and rawhide muscle were behind the blows that sank low and deep into the lanky Wolfer's lean belly. Doubling that seven-foot length in the middle. Rushing the Wolfer backwards and off balance.

The Wolfer's wind was knocked out. His snaggle-toothed mouth gaped open and his yellow eyes rolled. His long arms flailed wildly as he staggered backwards. One leg sank into the black bog up to his knee. The Wolfer tried to lunge forward. Tom kicked him hard in the belly. The seven foot Wolfer went over backwards into the bubbling black alkali bog.

The Wolfer floundered wildly in the mud that was sucking him down, trying to yell. The mud was getting into his gaping mouth, masking his bearded face. His long legs kicked downwards and the man was now waist deep in the sucking black bog. His hat was gone and the black ooze plastered his head and face. His long arms were flailing.

Dimly Tom Paul heard Curly Greer's bellowing laughter. Curly was whooping and howling like a wolf. Then he was riding a lunging, snorting, half broken bronc near the edge of the bog. Curly had his catch rope unbuckled and a loop shaken out. The wide loop swung a couple of times, then shot out and settled over the Wolfer's shoulders and down around his chest. Then he jerked it tight.

Curly Greer took his turns around the saddle horn and swung the big bronc around. The bronc humped and tried to pitch. Curly let out a whoop and tickled the bronc with his spurs. The big horse lunged ahead, crow-hopping, then pulled down to a trot.

Curly was twisted sideways in his saddle, looking across his shoulder and back down the taut rope at the mud-smeared seven-foot length of the Wolfer as it came sliding clear of the bog.

There was a wide grin on the bronc-rider's tanned face. He dragged the Wolfer clear of the bog. Dragging the

threshing, mud-smeared man over greasewood and buckbrush.

"Heat a runnin' iron, Tom!" bawled Curly, "I'll drag him dry and we'll run a big WW on his stinkin' hide!"

Then Curly and his spooked bronc dragged the Wolfer over the edge of a cutbank and into a brushy coulee out of sight.

Reap and Tal Weaver looked startled and uneasy and a little scared. Their hands were on their guns.

Sheriff Hank Howard stood astraddle of the wagon tongue, a grin on his leathery face.

Tom Paul had gotten hold of his temper. He was breathing hard, trying to grin.

The Wolfer had found his voice and was yelling, begging Curly to turn him loose. Curly's big laugh mocked the terrified man. Then the bronc-rider dragged the man up out of the cut-coulee.

The Wolfer's muddy clothes had been torn to rags by the brush and his hands and face were badly scratched and bleeding. He was half conscious, and his eyes were yellow, murderous slits in the ugly mask of whiskers and mud and blood.

Curly dragged the Wolfer up to his wagon and turned the rope loose. "You owe me a new rope, Sheriff," he grinned. "I'd never git the stink of the Wolfer off mine."

Reap and Tal Weaver were scowling at the grinning bronc twister, their hands on their guns. Curly's hard green eyes challenged them.

"That'll do, gents," drawled Sheriff Hank Howard. "Take it easy." He stepped up on the wagon tongue.

"Poke around in the mud with that prod pole, Tom," he said. "You know what to look for."

He climbed into the wagon and they could hear him searching it, moving things around.

Tom Paul kept sliding an occasional glance at Curly and the two Weavers and the Wolfer.

The Wolfer lay on the ground, spitting up mud, tobacco juice and blood. As sick, Curly said, as a poisoned wolf,

Sheriff Hank Howard came out of the covered wagon with a fancy high-powered rifle. He muttered something about having to burn his clothes, like he'd poked his nose into a skunk den.

While the others watched him, Tom jabbed and poked in the black mud until he was dripping with sweat and his bullet-nicked ribs throbbed with pain. He felt silly, and Curly's running fire of grinning advice was getting him madder every second.

He was fishing in that mud hole, he thought, for a little piece of steerhide with the WW brand. And he had no doubt but what the Wolfer had cut that hide into small chunks and poked them deep.

He was about to throw away the pole when its steel point struck something hard, a few feet below the surface. Then he dragged and pulled slowly while the others looked on.

★

IT WAS a saddle that Tom Paul pulled onto dry land. Muddy as it was, Tom knew it was Sid Weaver's saddle. A square skirted saddle with Sid Weaver's name stamped on the cantle.

Reap and Tal Weaver recognized the saddle. They gave one another swift, meaning looks but neither of them spoke. They were scowling hard at the Wolfer as he got painfully to his long legs. His slitted yellow eyes were venomous as those of some trapped animal.

"I was fishin' fer it," he lied, "when you fellers rid up. I seen young Tom Paul throw it into the bog after he'd killed Sid and turned Sid's horse loose. . . . I done fished out the WW brand he cut outa that butchered steer's hide. It's in that gunnysack you'll find under the wagon.

"I seen young Tom Paul shoot the beef," the Wolfer went on, his voice a dismal croak. "I seen Sid Weaver ride up on him whilst he was a-butcherin'. I seen young Tom Paul kill Sid Weaver. Watched through the field glasses. Yeah, I seen it all. I'll take the witness stand and, by hell, I'll put a hangin' rope around the neck of young Tom Paul."

The Wolfer's voice cracked and rattled and his yellow eyes narrowed as he pointed a long arm at Curly Greer.

"Yeah. And I seen that curly headed smart Aleck afore then! I seen him rope that big brockle-faced WW steer and tie the critter down. He was alone and he shore busted that steer hard. So damned hard that when he untied his hoggin' string and tailed the steer up, it was crippled. Front laig busted. And that big Curly rode off like the devil was a-chasin' 'im.

"That Curly's into it with Tom Paul. All the way. Pardners, by the hell! I'll git on that witness stand and send that big curly headed son to the pen!"

The Wolfer limped over to the side of his covered wagon and lifted a jug from the jockey-box. He pulled the cork and drank the rotgut whiskey like it was water.

He stood straighter when the strong whiskey burned his belly. His bearded face twisted into an evil leering grin. "You, Sheriff, arrest Tom Paul and Curly Greer fer murder and cattle-stealin'. I'll swear 'em into hell!"

"I doubt it," said Hank Howard. "Tom, fetch that gunnysack with the brand in it. You and Curly is comin' along with me. You're both under arrest. Wash Sid's saddle off and fetch it along."

Sheriff Hank Howard spoke to Reap and Tal Weaver, who were grinning faintly now. "Clean that Wolfer thing off and take him to town. Looks like he's your prize. Eye witness to more than a-plenty. Will you git him to town or will I have to fetch him along?"

"We'll take care of the Wolfer," said Reap quickly. "Eh, Tal?"

"Hold on, Sheriff!" The Wolfer's voice was rasping. "Don't leave me with them two Weavers! They'll kill me!"

"Kill you, Wolfer?" drawled the sheriff. "What for?"

"Yeah," growled Reap Weaver. "What you done for me'n Tal to kill you, Wolfer?"

"Nothin'! I done nothin', Reap! Me'n Sid was good friends. I seen Tom Paul kill 'im. That's all I done!"

Tom Paul dumped the piece of steer-hide out of the sack. It was the brand the Wolfer had cut out of the dead steer's hide. He rolled it hair side out, and tied it to his saddle. Then he mounted. He grinned at the Wolfer.

The tables were turned now. Give the

Wolfer enough rope and he'd tie himself up in a snarl of ugly lies.

"We'll see you in court, Wolfer," grinned Curly. "But wouldn't it be a hell of a joke if it was you that went to the pen or got hung?"

The Wolfer took another pull at his jug. Then his voice was a nasal whine.

"You got my rifle, Sheriff. You got no right to take that gun. It's mine!"

"You plumb certain," Hank Howard sat his horse with the high-powered rifle in his hand, "this is your gun, Wolfer? This .303 caliber huntin' rifle is yourn?"

"It's my gun, damn it. I swear it's mine. I paid big money fer that rifle. Had them special sights put on that cost me more'n them mules yonder. You're damned right that's my rifle. You got no right—"

"I just wanted to make certain," said the sheriff, "you'd claim it in front of four witnesses. You kin git it back when you come to court, Wolfer."

Hank Howard motioned to Tom and Curly. "Come along, boys."

The Wolfer stood there with his jug, his long jaw slack, fear glinting now in his yellow eyes, as he watched them ride away.

★

TOM PAUL eyed the rifle with a puzzled frown. Its checkered half-pistol grip and polished walnut stock, its shining blued steel barrel with its special sights. It was the handsomest sporting rifle he had ever seen. The only thing the Wolfer owned outside the team of good mules, that was not unclean.

"The only .303 caliber gun in this part of the cow-country," said Hank Howard. "One of them long range guns that shoots today and kills tomorrow. Shore purty. This'd be it, Curly?"

"That'd be her, Sheriff," grinned Curly.

Tom wanted to ask what they were talking about but he knew that neither of them was telling him about the gun now.

Before he could ask any questions Hank Howard told him it might be a good idea for Tom to unburden his mind some about how he'd gotten tangled up with the Wolfer.

Curly nodded and winked and loped on ahead. Tom Paul grinned mirthlessly, took a deep breath and told his story from beginning to end, while Sheriff Hank Howard listened in silence.

When he had finished, the sheriff nodded. He told Tom that was about the way he had it figured out. That it tied in with what Curly had told him after Curly had gotten Tom drunk and put him to bed, then come on to town with the news.

"I must have shore spilled Curly an earful," said Tom. "And he shore didn't lose any time takin' it to the Law."

Hank Howard told him not to feel too bitter towards Curly. That Curly hadn't gotten much of anything out of him. That the whiskey had knocked Tom out just about the time Tom started to talk.

"Curly was puttin' you to bed when he heard somebody. He hadn't lit a light in the bunkhouse and the kitchen light was out. He throwed a tarp over you and slipped outside. That's when he seen that beef fetched to the ranch and hung in the meat house."

"The Wolfer?"

Hank Howard nodded. "The Wolfer had the beef packed on his two mules. He hung up the meat and pulled out. Curly says he worked in the dark and had the job done and was gone in no time."

"Did Curly admit ropin' and cripplin' that WW steer?" asked Tom.

"Yep. He was ridin' a bronc and had to bust the steer hard to make it lay while he hogtied it. He wasn't just drunk and practicin' ropin'. He wanted a close look at the brand. When he tailed the steer up he seen he'd broke its leg. He was goin' to put the critter out of its misery but he

sighted a rider comin' and hightailed it."

"I was that rider," said Tom.

"Nope. It was Sid Weaver. Curly rode into a coulee and watched Sid look the crippled steer over. Then Sid sighted you and rode off. He couleed-up and waited. Then he tackled you."

"Then if Curly was hid out, he saw me kill Sid Weaver."

"Curly," said the Sheriff quietly, "saw the whole thing. He watched the Wolfer come up on you. Curly didn't miss a bet. He beat you back to the ranch and poured likker into you. Till he knocked you out. Then when the Wolfer planted the beef in the meat house, Curly come to town with his story."

"Why didn't he tell me he'd watched the whole thing?" Tom's voice was sharp with anger.

"Mebbyso," said Hank Howard, "it was one of Curly's jokes. Mebbyso he held out on you because you joshed him rough about losin' out with Linda. Curly can't take a josh on himself."

"If Curly was watchin'," said Tom, "then he knows that Sid Weaver started shootin' first. One of his bullets creased my ribs before I got to my gun .... Then I killed him."

"You feel almighty tough about shootin' Sid Weaver, Tom?"

"I ain't too happy about it. He was drunk and didn't give me a chance to explain about the steer. He was ornery and he aimed to kill me. It was him or me .... It shouldn't bother me none."

"Don't let it fret you, son," grinned Hank Howard, "one way or another. Because .... Ain't them your cowpunchers pullin' in at the ranch?"

The P Quarter Circle cowpunchers with their remuda and pack outfit were just pulling in at the home ranch. Curly Greer was talking to them, motioning, telling it scarey. Telling how their boss, Tom Paul, had whipped the Wolfer into the hog hole at Black Alkali Springs. How he'd dragged the Wolfer out. They were all grinning when Tom and the sheriff rode up.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell in the Badlands

SHERIFF HANK HOWARD took his two prisoners to town. He also took the brand and the Wolfer's rifle and Sid Weaver's saddle. He locked the brand and rifle and saddle in his office and took Tom and Curly over to his house for a midnight supper that his wife and Linda cooked. While the P Quarter Circle cowpunchers lined up at the bar to celebrate things in general.

While supper was being cooked the doctor patched up Tom's ribs. Linda fussed over him and Curly did a lot of joshing. That rough hoorawing of Curly's hurt worse than the biting carbolic solution the doctor used to cleanse the bullet rip in Tom's ribs.

"A purty, sweet girl like Linda," grinned Curly, "teasin' up with a dangerous gun-slinger like Tom. Hookin' up with a gun-slingin' killer!"

"Are you asking me to marry Tom, Curly? The answer is 'You bet!' It's always been like that, for a lot of years. I was wearing my hair in pigtails and Tommy wore short pants and long stockings with round garters to hold 'em up. At my birthday party when I was six and Tommy was ten, he popped the question and I said yes. It was a deal. It still goes. Don't it, Tom?"

"Shore does," blushed Tom.

"Then kiss her, bonehead," grinned Curly.

And that was when Tom Paul knew he was in love with Linda and that she loved him. And he needed her now more than he needed anything on earth. He managed to get a few minutes alone with Linda before they went over to the jail

where the sheriff's office was located. He told her then. And Linda said they'd get married as soon as the trial was over and Tom was cleared, while the judge was still there in the courtroom.

But back at the jail Sheriff Hank Howard said he didn't reckon the case would come to trial. That he didn't look for Reap and Tal Weaver and the Wolfer to show up. Not in the morning, anyhow. Not until he fetched them back to town with bench warrants.

"The Weavers sold their outfit a few days ago, lock, stock and barrel, for cash on the barrelhead. They was fixin' to quit the country when Sid got killed. They was gittin' scared. They're worse scared now, with the Wolfer showin' up again."

Sheriff Hank Howard grinned slowly and unrolled the piece of hide with the WW brand showing on the hairy side. Then turned it over so that the fleshy side of the hide showed.

The Wolfer had scraped the under side of the hide and had been curing it with the coyote pelts at the fire. He had seen them coming and hid the strip of hide.

"For a long time the Weavers have bin whittlin' on cattle belongin' to the Varney outfit acrost the river. Look here, Tom. Feel the under side of this hide. You'll find the Varney Flyin' V worked into that connected WW iron . . . . That's what Curly was lookin' for when he roped that brockle-faced steer.

"Curly was hired by the Varney outfit to ketch the Weavers rustlin' their cattle. This ketches 'em. We got the rest of the hide that the Wolfer pillowed Sid's head with. It's got a little tally mark on it that the Weavers never noticed. This hide will convict 'em."

Curly grinned wide. "I got a couple more like it hid out."

"Your father, Tom, was onto the Weavers, John Paul told me. And he told the three Weavers he'd give 'em a week to sell out and quit the country. But the Weavers didn't sell out. They hired the Wolfer to kill your dad."

The sheriff took a little box from his safe. From it he took a battered looking bullet. Then from his vest pocket he took another bullet. He laid the two side by side on his desk.

"These two bullets come from the same .303 caliber rifle. That older lookin' bullet killed John Paul about a year ago. This 'un with a little blood still on it killed Sid Weaver day before yesterday."

"You mean," said Tom Paul, "that—"

"That you musta bin kinda rattled, son. You wasn't shootin' like no Dead Eye Dick. You was usin' a .45 six-shooter. One bullet smashed Sid Weaver's gun arm and another hit him in the leg. I think there's one buried in the front of Sid's saddle. The other shots plumb missed.

"Curly seen it all. He heard the crack of that high-power rifle while you and Sid was swappin' lead. And then he sighted the Wolfer. The Wolfer was layin' behind a sandstone rimrock at a range of about three hundred and fifty yards. The Wolfer's a dead shot with a rifle like this 'un with the special Lyman peep-sight . . . . The bullet that killed Sid and that me'n Curly fished outa Sid's dead carcass come from this rifle. You kin tell that to Linda at breakfast time."

Sheriff Hank Howard and Curly had it figured out that the Wolfer had found out the Weavers were getting ready to sell out and quit the country. So he had come back to bleed them for more money. Otherwise he'd tell that they had hired him to kill John Paul. Sid had gone to make a dicker with the Wolfer. Or to kill him. Sid had been drunk and ornery that day. He must have had a ruckus with the Wolfer.

The Wolfer saw his chance to kill Sid and make Tom Paul pay for the job through blackmail. And except for the fact that Curly was on the prowl for stolen

cattle, the Wolfer's game might have worked.

"Now mebbyso," said Sheriff Hank Howard, "Reap and Tal will kill the Wolfer and save the Law the expense and trouble . . . . Or the Wolfer will kill them. Or mebbyso the three of 'em will throw in together and head down the Outlaw Trail. I'm givin' 'em till sunrise to show up. If they ain't here in town by then, I'm goin' after 'em with bench warrants. Me'n Curly."

"You and Curly," said Tom Paul flatly, "and me. The Wolfer killed my dad. The Weavers hired him to do the job. You can't deal me out."

Curly grinned and told Tom to brush up on his target work.

But Sheriff Hank Howard smiled slowly and nodded. "I knowed you'd want to go along, son. Otherwise Curly and I would have kept the deal a secret."

★

THE Wolfer and the two Weavers were quitting the country. Where the Wolfer had camped at Black Alkali Springs there remained only the ashes of his campfire and dim wagon tracks. And the tracks of his mule team and light wagon were lost quickly in the badlands. Lost too were the tracks made by the shod hoofs of Tal and Reap Weaver's horses.

Sheriff Hank Howard told Tom and Curly that they'd pick up the Weavers' sign before they cut the sign of the Wolfer. Because the trapper and that outfit of his could vanish like the earth had opened up and swallowed mules, wagon and man. It was like a Sioux war party disappearing in the night and only a trained buckskin plainsman or another Injun could follow the sign.

Curly said that the Wolfer was easy to follow if a man kept to the windward, because the stink would carry for miles. He grinned at his own joke but his eyes were as cold as green ice and his grin was flat-lipped, like a snarl. Curly was a little drunk and his hoorawing had a bite to it.

Hank Howard told Tom that Curly was out to make a tough rep for himself. He was killing the Wolfer and the two Weavers on sight unless they got him first. And he had a deputy sheriff badge in his pocket to back his gunplay. It was griping him because he had to take orders from Sheriff Hank Howard yesterday and the day before. Curly had wanted to crowd the two Weavers into a gunplay and kill them, but Hank had told him to take it easy.

Curly called Hank 'Grandma' and 'Slow Motion'. And he joshed Tom Paul about his poor shooting.

"We had 'em all three here yesterday," Curly pointed to the ashes of the Wolfer's campfire at Black Alkali Springs. "We shoulda killed 'em then. Now you give 'em a night's start and we foller a cold trail that dims out in the badlands."

Curly took the law badge from his pocket and pinned it to his shirt pocket. Then took a stiff drink from his bottle.

"The Flyin' V outfit has put a purty bounty on the Weavers and the Wolfer. I'm collectin' it. You travel too slow for me, Hank. And Tom here don't shoot fast and straight enough to be anything but underfoot in a tight. So here's where our trails split. I'm playin' mine lone-handed. I'm bounty-huntin'. So-long!"

Curly Greer grinned and rode off at a lope. His hat was pulled at a tough angle across his hard green eyes and he sat his horse with a go-to-hell swagger.

Sheriff Hank Howard shook his head. Tom's face was still white with anger.

Tom knew now that Curly had purposely gotten him drunk and then left him to the mercy of the Wolfer or the two Weavers if they had wanted to kill him. And the big spur-jingling bronc-rider, for all his joshing, was nursing a bitter grudge against Tom on account of Linda Howard.

"Curly wouldn't shed no tears," Hank Howard put it into words, "if we was both to git killed down in the badlands, son. He wants my sheriff job. And he wants your girl. Likewise he wants the glory and the bounty-money for killin' the Weavers and the Wolfer."

Tom Paul had shared something of Curly's impatience at going after Reap and Tal Weaver and the Wolfer and he felt a little guilty. When he said as much he got a nod and a slow, easy grin from the veteran law officer.

money figgerin' and killed Sid. Then he made a bold play to trap you. And now Reap and Tal Weaver kin hang anything they want on the Wolfer, from beef butcherin' to the murder of their brother Sid. They seen me fish that rifle bullet outa Sid's dead carcass and they watched me take that rifle away from the Wolfer. They won't kill the Wolfer till they've used him. . . . That Wolfer savvies how to bait a man-trap. Curly Greer might ride into it down yonder in the badlands."

Sheriff Hank Howard's voice lost noth-

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"I'm playin' a hunch, son, that Reap and Tal Weaver ain't runnin' so fast nor so far as Curly Greer figgers. Them Weavers don't booger that easy. For all this stock detective work, that big curly-headed feller has bin doin' for the Flyin' V, he ain't built up a case ag'in' 'em that'll hold water in a law court. You got to ketch a cattle rustler dead to rights to hang it on 'im.

"The Wolfer was smoke-curin' that worked brand to hold as a threat ag'in' the Weaver boys. But he was just wastin' green willow smoke. Reap and Tal Weaver know that. Sid knowed that steer. He was onto Curly's game. Sid Weaver and the Wolfer seen Curly rope the steer and examine the brand, then turn the crippled steer loose. It's my guess that Sid and the Wolfer was dickerin' for how much would the WW outfit pay the Wolfer to kill Curly, when you showed up and gummed the deal. You saved Curly's life, like as not.

"Then Sid Weaver, drunk and ornery, charged you. The Wolfer did some fast

ing of its quiet, lazy drawl. But his puckered blue eyes were bright and hard. And Tom Paul knew that the grizzled peace officer knew just exactly what he was doing and saying. And what he was thinking. How, in his own quiet and deliberate way, he was telling Tom that Curly Greer was just as dangerous and cold-blooded as the men whose hides he was so anxious to hang on the bounty fence.

Tom remembered how, when he was a small boy, he and Linda had seen Hank Howard's blue eyes dimmed with tears when he had to shoot a crippled cow pony.

And he remembered a night on the street in the little cow-town when Sheriff Hank Howard had stood with a smoking six-shooter in his hand and killed two tough renegades who had ridden up the Outlaw Trail to kill the sheriff where they found him.

Now Hank Howard was letting that loud-mouthed glory-hunter ride after his wolf meat. And in the heart of the grizzled peace-officer was the love of his daughter and the wisdom of a brave man

who weighed life and death, crookedness and honesty, according to his lights.

It seemed to Tom Paul as they rode along into the broken badlands that he was borrowing something of this older man's grim wisdom. And that when the time came to face the men who lay in wait somewhere in that outlaw strip, he would not weaken. He would be shooting to kill, without fear, without mercy.

They rode in silence until they were deep in the middle of those broken badlands. With the sun setting and the black shadows of dusk gathering in the broken hills.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wolfer Springs His Trap!

THEY found a wagon track, and the prints of mule shoes in the dirt where few men had ever ridden. With them were the tracks of two shod horses. And below in a grassy pocket was the Wolfer's canvas covered wagon, his team of hobbled mules grazing, smoke coming from the stovepipe that jutted up through the canvas top. The door at the front of the wagon was closed. The Wolfer might be inside. There was no sign at all of Reap and Tal Weaver or their horses.

Sheriff Hank Howard motioned Tom Paul back into the heavy brush. The law officer's eyes were puckered to bright blue slits. His voice a soft whisper, though they were on a timbered ridge above the camp that was a quarter of a mile below.

"Peaceful as hell, ain't it? But the Wolfer has his trap set."

Tom nodded. He knew why the grizzled sheriff was so cautious. The Wolfer and the two Weaver bothers could be hidden near here, waiting. Tom and the law officer slid their saddle guns from their scabbards.

Then Hank Howard cussed softly and pointed with his carbine. Coming into the open pocket was a lone rider. It was Curly Greer.

Curly, the glory-hunter, the bounty collector! Playing range detective. And riding boldly, carelessly, recklessly into the Wolfer's trap!

Tom acted without giving the sheriff a chance to stop him. He held no friendship for that big hoorawing bronc-rider, but he wasn't letting him ride to his death without giving him a warning.

Tom rode out into plain sight and motioned with his hat. Curly, across the canyon, saw him and made a derisive gesture, thumbing his nose with both hands.

Tom heard the grizzled Hank growl profanity. Then the sheriff lined the sights of his carbine and pulled the trigger. He had taken quick aim at a rock just ahead of Curly. The bullet hit the rock and ricocheted off with a whine that threaded through the gun echoes shattering the peaceful silence of the badlands.

Curly's horse whirled and jumped. The bronc-rider spurred into the brush a split second before the Wolfer's gun cracked in behind some brush. Hank Howard yelled at Tom to get the hell into cover just as Reap and Tal Weaver opened fire.

Tom felt the stabbing, thudding sting of a bullet nicking his shoulder. Then he was back behind the brush with Hank, and the bullets were whining like hornets, clipping the brush around them.

Tom and the sheriff had sprung the Wolfer's trap before Curly Greer rode into its death jaws. But they had been forced into revealing their own shelter and had drawn the Weavers' fire. And now in the coming dusk of the badlands twilight it was a brush fight and every man for himself.

They could hear Curly Greer cussing them thanklessly. There was a new tone to the big bronc-rider's voice that puzzled Tom until the grizzled sheriff explained.

"The Wolfer didn't miss. Curly's hit somewheres."

Curly's horse sidled out from behind a brush, its bridle reins dragging, the saddle empty. A half minute later they heard Curly's wild howl of pain; heard him cussing. And the Wolfer's high-pitched rattling laugh.

"Walked into the wolf trap, didn't yuh, you curly wolf!" The Wolfer's rattling laugh was cut short by a yelp of pain.

"A trapped curly wolf has fangs, you stinkin' son!" The bronc-rider's pain-harsh voice mocked the trapper.

"That damn' Wolfer," growled the sheriff, "must have his wolf traps set all around the brush and covered. Curly's stepped into one."

The Wolfer had gotten careless in his rush to get a gloating look at his trapped enemy and Curly had taken a shot at him and had hit him somewhere.

Hank Howard and Tom were off their horses now. The grizzled sheriff tried the old Injun trick of putting his hat on the end of his gun-barrel and slowly shoving it above the brush. It drew the fire of the two Weavers. Hank grinned and pulled his hat back on his head at a slanting angle across his squinting blue eyes.

"They're together, son. Reap an' Tal Weaver. Behind that brush yonder. You stay here. Now and then you take a shot at their brush. I'll slip around back an' flank 'em. We'll smoke them two gents out."

Then Sheriff Hank Howard was on his way.

Tom crouched behind the brush and began shooting. His shots drew a hail of bullets from the two Weaver guns. The bullet-nick in the top of his left shoulder was leaking a lot of blood. But the pain wasn't much more than just annoying, and it was steadying his nerves.

He felt no fear or panic; only a cold hatred. And an impatience to get the Weavers out of the way so that he could tackle the Wolfer down yonder where the evil trapper and the curly headed bronc-rider were fighting out a grim duel to the death. Curly was wounded and caught in the steel jaws of a big wolf trap. Asking no quarter, giving none, as he lay trapped and suffering. That big grinning bronc-twister had plenty of guts.

Minutes dragged past like hours. Tom kept waiting for the crack of Hank Howard's gun. Tom shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine of his carbine and began shooting again at the brush patch that hid the Weavers. And only one Weaver gun answered him.

Fear gripped Tom now—not fear for himself but for Sheriff Hank Howard. And then he could wait no longer. He slipped around towards the brush that hid at least one of the Weavers. He nearly stumbled over Hank Howard.

★

THE sheriff lay motionless in behind a brush patch. His hat had fallen off and lay on the ground. There was a bullet rip in the crown and the law officer's thick white hair was matted with oozing blood.

Tom lost all sense of caution then. He crashed through the brush like a charging young bull. A gun flashed and the bullet whined past his head. He saw the ugly, twisted face of Reap Weaver and the gun in Tom's hand spewed fire. Reap's head jerked back and the brush crashed as he went down. Tom's bullet had struck Reap Weaver in the face and had torn out the back of his skull.

Tal Weaver lay sprawled on his face, arms outflung and one leg doubled under him. Tom reached down and yanked at his hair. Tal's eyes were wide open and sightless. Dead.

Tom Paul levered a smoking shell from his saddle gun and shoved a fresh cartridge into the magazine without even

knowing that he was doing so. Then he started his zigzag, cautious trip down into the pocket where the shooting between Curly Greer and the Wolfer had ceased.

Tom went down the slant at a run. Stumbling, catching himself, crouching, sliding, ducking low to keep behind the brush that screened his progress. Sweat soaked his body and he was winded by the time he reached the foot of the slant. He straightened up behind some brush and pulled air into his heaving lungs. He had to wait until he got his wind again. A winded man can't shoot straight.

He kept listening for sounds. Finally he heard the rattle of a steel trap chain. And he could hear Curly grunting, like he was in a lot of pain. The sound came from about a hundred feet away. Tom reckoned that the bronc-rider was trying to get free from the trap.

Tom dared not go any nearer. There was an open stretch between him and where Curly was fighting the wolf trap. And somewhere not far off would be the Wolfer.

Tom Paul had time to wonder now that the Wolfer had not taken any snap-shots at him as he came down the slant. There must have been brief moments when he had made a running target of himself in that headlong rush down the steep brushy slope. Now he knew. The Wolfer was waiting for a close shot at him. A sure shot. And the yellow-eyed bushwhacker was somewhere not far off. Waiting with a cocked gun.

Tom shifted his carbine to his left hand and slid his six-shooter from its holster. This was going to be a short-range fight. He could toss a rock the short distance between where he crouched and the noise Curly was making where he fought the wolf trap. And it was no more than a stone's throw to the trapper's covered wagon.

Tom stared hard at the wagon. The door that had been closed was open about half way now. In the gathering dusk the inside of the wagon was darkly shadowed. Tom thought he heard sounds inside the wagon. And that was where the smell that clogged his nostrils was coming from.

The Wolfer was inside his covered wagon with the door propped part way open. Perhaps the lanky trapper was trying some trick. Or he most likely had gotten back to his wagon to wrap up a bullet wound and swill whiskey.

Tom figured that if he could slip around this brush patch he would be close enough to catch sight of any movement inside the wagon. He doubled over into a crouch and began working his way along behind the buckbrush, moving cautiously. His eyes were watching the wagon through the brush screen.

Then the ground under his left foot exploded into a puff of dust. The heavy steel jaws of a wolf trap snapped his booted leg above the ankle. Tom let out a yelp and threw himself down on the ground as the trap chain rattled.

★

FROM the partly open doorway of the covered wagon a carbine spat streaks of flame. Bullets whined above Tom's flattened form and kicked up dirt around him. From the wagon the Wolfer's rattling laugh, drunk with rot-gut booze and grizzled triumph, mocked him.

Tom Paul had dropped his six-shooter. He still held his saddle gun and now he lay on the flat of his belly and began shooting. He felt no pain, no panicky fear of death. The long geared trapper in that wagon was the man who had killed his father. This was a fight to the death. He pulled the trigger and levered fresh cartridges into the breech of his saddle carbine. Emptied his gun. Re-loaded and kept shooting.

From the covered wagon there sounded

the heavy crash of something. Then lesser, smaller noises. Smoke no longer came from the short length of stovepipe, but it was coming out of the partly opened doorway. And inside the wagon there was a dull explosion and then tongues of flame licking the smoke. The covered wagon was on fire. A kerosene can had been knocked over and spilled, caught fire and exploded.

Inside that smoke-filled wagon there came the insane cursing and screaming of the Wolfer. Then he came tumbling out. His grease-caked clothes were afire, and the fire had caught his long hair and scraggly beard. He fell sprawling on the ground, clawing at his flaming clothes, rolling over and over, writhing and screaming.

"Don't shoot 'im!" yelled Curly Greer. "Let the son die like that! How do you like it in hell, you stinkin' snake?"

There was only one way to stop at least one of those ghastly voices before his own pain knocked him out. Tom Paul lined the sights of his saddle carbine. His gun roared, and the lanky body of the Wolfer quit threshing around. The trapper lay there, dead, in his smoking clothes.

Tom Paul sat up now and fought back waves of pain and nausea as he pried at the jagged sawlike jaws of the wolf trap, using his carbine barrel for a lever. But his efforts were weak and futile. The trap was fairly new and the steel spring too strong. He was dizzy with pain and his hands were wet with cold sweat that soaked his whole body in a clammy bath.

The blazing wagon would set a brush fire. He would be held here, trapped. It would take more than his ebbing strength to spring the trap, or to pull the chain from its deeply anchored and buried "deadman" log.

He felt the heat of the fire now, the sting of smoke in his eyes and nostrils. He fought the trap in grim silence, until his hands were torn and bleeding. His breath came in heaving sobs. Desperation gave him a new strength but it was not enough to release him.

In a short time the brush would be afire. He would suffer that agonizing torture from which he had just saved the Wolfer.

He shouted to Curly but got no reply. The big bronc-rider was either dead or unconscious.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

PICTURE OF A GRADE-A CITIZEN!

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★ ★ ★ ★

Night was closing in now. The darkness thrown back by the crackling blaze of the burning wagon.

"Take it easy, son!"

Tom Paul pawed the smoke grime and dirt and sweat from his eyes with bleeding hands that smeared his vision with a dirty red film. That was Sheriff Hank Howard's voice and it was Hank who now was bending down over the wolf trap.

"Steady, Tom. Don't fight it."

Hank Howard slowly bent down the steel spring and opened the jaws of the trap. "Yank your laig, Tom. Quick. I can't keep this damn thing open much longer."

Tom yanked his foot free. The steel jaws snapped with a bang.

"Curly!" croaked Tom.

"Yeah. Try to stand on your laigs, Tom. I don't think that ankle or foot is busted. I'll git Curly."

Tom's leg was throbbing with sickening pain. Everything went black and he passed out. Then came awake again, shivering like a man with chills and fever. He could hear Hank Howard fighting with the other trap. He crawled and staggered and fell and went the rest of the way on his hands and knees.

Curly was either dead or unconscious. His clothes were blood-soaked and his face was as yellow as old paper. Tom gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering as he helped Hank get Curly's foot out of the blood-wet wolf trap.

Sheriff Hank Howard took time to get the rawhide hobbles off the two mules. Then he got Tom into his saddle and started to lift Curly's two hundred pounds off the ground.

Curly groaned and his green eyes blinked open. They were bloodshot, glassy. He recognized the sheriff and Tom Paul.

"As a bounty-hunter," he croaked with a ghastly grin, "I was a damned good bronc-twister . . . . I wanted that sheriff badge, Hank. And I wanted Tom Paul's girl. Lost both . . . . No hard feelin's. I'm dyin' with my boots on. So-long."

Blood trickled from behind his big grinning white teeth and his glassy eyes closed.

Hank Howard roped Curly's dead body on his horse. He said that if the brush fire didn't cremate the dead bodies of the Weaver boys and the Wolfer, he'd send a burial crew from town.

Hank Howard's head was blood-matted. He said a bullet must have grazed his bone head enough to rip his scalp and knock him out. The last thing he remembered was killing Tal Weaver. And when he woke up, the wagon was on fire and the Wolfer was screaming and Curly was laughing like he'd gone plumb locoed.

Tom's leg was badly bruised above the ankle. But he could work his toes and ankle so he reckoned there were no bones broken.

"But if Linda holds me to my promise, Hank, I won't dance much at my own weddin'. I told her to keep the town preacher handy; that I was marryin' her on sight. And she said she'd hold me to that threat. I've never yet known Sheriff Hank Howard's gal Linda to break a promise or let me out of one of mine."

Sheriff Hank Howard grinned and nodded. They topped the high ridge and looked back. The blaze was dying out. The brush was too green to burn.

Hank Howard pulled a leather covered flask from his pocket and unscrewed the top. It was good whiskey. It took the taste of all this out of their mouths. Then the sheriff asked Tom Paul what he was grinning about.

"My six-shooter and saddle gun. Left 'em back yonder. For keeps. I'm not regrettin' anything. But I wouldn't want any more of it. I'm no gun-slinger. What are you grinnin' at?"

Sheriff Hank Howard passed him the leather flask.

THE END

WHILE THE HANGNOOSE WAITS!

Fate dealt Johnny Moran a cold-deck hand the day he rode into Red Coulee just in time to see old Sam Trimble, boss of the mighty Triangle T, take his last ride in a pine box. For when a cattle-king of Sam's caliber is murdered, someone's got to do the cotton-wood prance, and a ruthless undercover bunch of killers and crooks figured Johnny as their best bet to fill a waiting grave!

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BLOODY WOOL— AND BUCKSHOT!

By Dee Linford

All hell broke loose in the sheep camp.

Thrilling Saga of Warring Sheepers

Dollar Sam Deaver was about as shrewd, ornery and merciless a herder as ever slapped his brand on another man's sheep. Witness the time he baited a sure-fire trap for the Sheepers' Pool, which would give him every woolly in that wide range, and offered, in return for his wholesale steal, each small sheepman a chance to go for his gun—and die quick!

CHAPTER ONE

Hard-Luck Herd

THEY had lambed and docked and sheared the desert winter herds, and had put twenty thousand sheep in the Deaver Double-O brand on the trail to summer grass. Dollar Sam Deaver

and the Black Buck were down at the Head River footbridge, counting their herds onto the reserve and feeling the new ranger out on how much he knew of their forest service hook-up. And young Jim Tripp had no more than got his herd to the top of the high grass saddle overlooking the bridge when the Black Buck came riding up on a lathering red horse.

"That new ranger's caught onta you poolers slippin' sheep on the forest under the Double-O brand," the Black Buck blurted, reining up before the young sheepman. "He's got his neck bowed for trouble. He ketches the rest of you like he caught Dutch Pringle just now, an' they'll be hell to pay!"

The Buck was Dollar Sam's range boss and bodyguard and head yes-man. His name was really Buck Black, but his yellow eyes and mangy black beard gave him striking resemblance to some taggy old black herd-marker buck, and the Double-O hands had turned the name around, to make it fit. The sodden hulk of him dwarfed the bigness of his lank red horse, and he was sweating as bad as the bay from the hard climb up.

"The greencoat spotted Dutch's underbit earmark on sheep wearin' the Double-O brand, while Dutch was countin' on," the Black Buck elaborated. He waved a hand as he spoke, down toward the swinging footbridge that spanned the river at the bottom of the slope.

All sheep grazing on the west end of the Head River range had to cross over that old cable-slung plank span, Jim Tripp knew, in order to reach summer grass. It took forever sometimes to cross the big outfits like Double-O through so narrow a bottleneck, but it gave the rangers a made-to-order tally chute, and there it was that all sheep had been counted onto the Head River forest as far back as Jim Tripp remembered.

All sheep, that is, except the Double-O herds. Dollar Sam Deaver had a knack for getting something on the right man at the right time, and for fifteen years he'd been bribing or blackmailing the district rangers into letting him count his own herds onto the reserve. That was why Dollar Sam had been able to hold range for twenty thousand sheep in the Double-O allotments, while he'd never run more than fifteen thousand head at any time in his life. And that was howcome he could let the little sheepers like Jim Tripp slip their farm bands into his big herds—at a price, of course—for a go at the forest grass.

"That ornery-eyed greenpants collared Dutch like a sheep dawg jumpin' a rabbit," the Black Buck went on. "He wanted to know who owned that earmark, an' Dutch would of spilled it if Sam hadn't been there. Then we'd all of had our tail in a sling. As it was, Sam augured out of it. But Sam ain't takin' any chances on the rest of yuh."

Jim Tripp was sitting his buckskin mare in the shade of a big juniper clump, alongside Cranky George Crowe, his camp mover and self-appointed guardian. He swallowed that chunk of bad news, and asked for more.

"What's Sam goin' to do?"

The Black Buck pulled a couple of long papers from his pocket. "Only one thing *to* do. Sam's had Dutch sign his sheep over to the Double-O. He's havin' all you other poolers do the same. Course, Sam'll hand 'em back when we trail off the reserve, come fall."

It was a big wad to swallow, and Cranky George's throat gurgled faintly, as if he found it hard as Jim Tripp did to down. But Jim didn't look at him. Cranky George had warned direly against doing business with Dollar Sam, outside the law. Now it looked as if maybe Cranky had been right.

Jim Tripp laughed shortly. "Sign my sheep to Dollar Sam, to keep till fall? That's a good 'un! That 'ud be like hand-

in' Cranky here a Chris'mas jug to hold till the Fourth o' July. Cranky'd hold it all right—every drop of it. An' that's the hell of it!"

The Black Buck scowled. "You'll git yore blatters back. Sam's only tryin' to keep you poolers—an' the Double-O—out o' trouble. Sam seen somethin' like this comin'. He was ready for it. I got two bills o' sale here, ready to sign. One from you to Dollar Sam, dated yestiday. One from Sam to you, dated t'day. You'll keep that 'un. All you'll have to do is show it, any time, to claim yore herd."

★

JIM TRIPP mulled it over. He had seven hundred wet ewes in the Double-O herd he was tending for the summer, gratis, as part of his deal with Dollar Sam. He didn't need telling he might lose the whole band, in fines and costs, if he were caught trespassing on the forest. He didn't trust Dollar Sam much, though, when it came to sheep.

"Sounds all right, Buck. But—"

"Shore it's all right. It's a smart way out. You got to hand it to Sam—"

"I'll hand it to *you!*" Cranky George's voice intruded, dry and snappish as alkali. "An' *you* kin hand it to Sam. He ain't workin' nothing like that. Jimmy ain't signin' them papers!"

The Buck regarded the old man in surprise. He was nettled, but he tried not to show it.

Cranky George had a bad name in the Head River country. He wasn't a man to get mad at—not fighting mad, anyhow. Cranky George carried a sharp steel hook at the end of his right sleeve, where his right hand should have hung. He'd been known to use that hook as a tortured grizzly uses its claws.

The Black Buck bleated, "Now see here, Cranky, you poolers has got to be reasonable. You got no feed on the foothills this year. Dollar Sam was big hearted enough to let you run sheep on the forest, under his permit. Now Sam's in a jam, on account of it. You can't just let Sam down—"

"Sam will die o' enlargement o' the heart, if he ain't more keerful," Cranky George commented, pleasedly acid. "He's givin' these poolers everything the hen lays except the aig. He hawgs all the range with his forest service hook-up, then he sells it back to them he's grafted off—an' gits his sheep herded free in the bargain. Now he's got his tail in a crack. An' me an' Jimmy here—why, we're a-cryin' them there crocerdile tears!"

The Buck was getting mad, and it showed in his yellow eyes. "I'm talkin', Cranky. Yo're listenin', see? Tripp an' them other poolers is in this thing, deep as me an' Sam. Now, either they string along an' do the right thing by Sam, or they cut their farm sheep out o' the Double-O herds an' dawg 'em back to the foothills!"

Cranky George nodded, jerkily. A quiet gleam had crept into his single watery eye. "Fair nuff, Buck. Now *I'm* talkin' an' *yo're* listenin'. Jimmy here's paid Dollar Sam a round dollar a head fer pasture fer these sheep. It was in the bargain Sam would take keer o' the ranger, like he's allus done. Jimmy's lived up to his share o' the 'greement. Now these sheep are goin' right on down to the bridge there, like they are. 'Cause me an' Jimmy is takin' 'em. An' you can't do nothing about it!"

The Black Buck stared, the pupils in his eyes mere slits. He looked at the old man's hips, where no gun hung, then on down to the saddle gun under his leg.

Quick as a cat's, those eyes shifted to Jim Tripp, glittered a second at the old .44 the young sheeper carried tied to his saddle latigos in front of him. Then the Black Buck grinned, and his hand settled to the butt of his Colt pistol.

"They's one thing I kin do, Cranky,"

he purred, like a big cat about to spring. "An' I won't never find a better chance."

The old man's pale, nitric eye had never left the big range boss's face. Now he reached up and scratched lazily the side of his neck with the curved steel hook that stuck out of his sleeve.

"Thet's right, Buck," Cranky George echoed in a voice Jim Tripp had never heard before. "You won't never find a better chance. An' you ain't tied, now!"

That shining hooked claw was no more than two feet from the Black Buck's nose, and the sunlight fell upon it with an evil glint. It had just the right curve to scratch a man's neck good, or to lay him open from his straddle to his ribs.

The Buck watched it in loathing fascination, his face as drawn and white as a sick man's, and his yellow eyes looked green. He pulled his hand away from his pistol. The palm was damp, and he wiped it on his woolly chaps.

"Hell, Cranky," he laughed hollowly, "don't git yore back up. I was only tellin' you what Dollar Sam said."

"You told us. Now ride back an' tell Dollar Sam. Tell 'im you bit off a bigger chunk than you could chew. Tell 'im you had to spit or swaller, an' you was feared to spit!"

Jim Tripp sat watching, half a grin on his sun-burned face. It was a sight to see—the Black Buck taking water before a twenty-a-month, one-armed camp jack.

Jim Tripp hated to horn in, but he'd had time to think things over, and his mind was made up. "Cut it out, Cranky," he told the old man. "Buck's right. I'm in this, with Dollar Sam. An' I ain't droppin' the poker just when it gets hot. I'm stickin', Buck. Give me them papers. I'll sign."

"You'll sign?" Cranky George choked on his breath. "You done lost what little sense you got?"

Jim Tripp paid him no attention. He took the papers and pen the Buck had handed him and signed the dotted lines. The bill insuring his ownership he folded into his pocket. The other he handed back to Buck Black. But before the range boss could take it, Cranky George's shining steel claw slashed downward.

The hook was aimed at the paper. Jim Tripp jerked it to one side and the steel claw struck his saddle, and buried itself an inch into the hardwood pommel.

The sound and the sudden action boogered Jim Tripp's buckskin. It whirled and jerked the hook's tight-laced leather sleeve from the old man's stub arm.

"That's yankin' out his fangs!" the Black Buck guffawed. "Let's see how bad his bite is *now!*"

The range boss stood in his stirrups as he spoke and grabbed the old man's stub arm in his two big hands. He twisted the stump into a hammerlock and yanked Cranky George from his saddle.

The scrawny old man snarled in rage and pain, but he was helpless as a child in the burly ramrod's grip. The Buck hugged him close, holding his feet off the ground, and twisted on the handless arm.

"You ain't ever goin' to rip another man's guts with that hook, Cranky!" the range boss grated. " 'Cause when I git through they won't be enough of this stump left to strap that claw onto!"

Jim Tripp saw the Buck meant what he said. He reached for his .44, then saw he'd never get it untied in time to help Cranky George. He remembered the old man telling him that was a hell of a way to carry a gun, and now he saw why.

Then his eye fell upon the old man's hook. He tore it loose from the pommel, grabbed hold of the leather sleeve, and swung it blunt-side down against the range boss's hands.

It was a wicked weapon, even when the claw at the end was reversed. It left a long white line across the back of the ramrod's hand—a white line that raised up and turned blue.

The Black Buck roared in pain, dropped Cranky George to the ground, and whirled snarling on Jim Tripp. He grabbed the hook in one gloved hand and jerked at it, and Jim Tripp jerked on the sleeve at the same time. The claw's sharp point was driven through the foreman's glove, under pressure of his own grip, and Jim Tripp's sudden pull on the sleeve tore the hook through the flesh of the Buck's meaty palm, so deep the point scraped on bone.

The hook was in Jim Tripp's hand then, dripping red. The Buck was staring at his torn glove, at the blood welling through from his slashed palm.

"You asked for it, Buck," Jim Tripp panted, holding the hook ready to use again. "An' you got it. You'll get more of the same, if Cranky's arm's broke. I'll carve you up like a stuffed Chris'mas goose!"

He brandished the hook in his anger, and the burly foreman shrank from him, cold fear blanching his yellow eyes. He saw Cranky was back on his feet then, working the stub of his arm, and he knew the arm wasn't broken. His anger smoked out of him.

"You come up here to get my John Henry on this bill o' sale," he told the Buck. "It's on now. You better take it an' ride, 'fore you get inta trouble!"

The foreman accepted the paper without a word and turned his horse down the hill. But once out of reach of that razor sharp claw, he reined in and looked back, still gripping his wounded hand.

"I'll be seein' you agin, Tripp!" he snarled. "An' that ol' diamondback rattler there on the ground, too. We'll see who got inta trouble here t'day!"

Jim Tripp looked at him and grinned. "Don't forget a rattler's fangs can be pizen, Buck," he said, "even after they been pulled out."

"I won't fergit nothin'!" the Black Buck growled, licking his torn hand like a wounded dog. "An' I'll see that neither o' you fergits!"

CHAPTER TWO

Shotgun Sheep-Count

JIM TRIPP watched Buck Black out of gun range down the slope, then he dismounted to help Cranky George back on with his hook. But the old man shook him off, cross and mean as Jim had ever seen him, and laced the leather sleeve to his stub, unaided.

"I'm through feelin' sorry for the nubheaded fools in this world!" the old campman snapped. "I ain't doin' any more for you. An' you ain't doin' nothing for me!"

Jim Tripp looked at him. "You don't like it, Cranky, me playin' Sam Deaver's crooked game. Hell, I don't like it, neither. But I like it better'n seein' my sheep starve down on the foothills!"

"It ain't right—"

"Shore it ain't right. It ain't right that a honest man can't get sheep range on the forest. But he can't any more."

"All you'd had to do," Cranky George said irately, "was to ride down to that bridge an' tell the ranger the straight o' what Sam's doin', an' you'd of *had* grass. Dollar Sam would lose his range rights, if the forest higher-ups knowed what he was doin'. He'd be kicked clean off the range. Then there'd be room for you an' the other poolers."

"Tell the ranger what was up, an' get fined for trespassin' on Uncle Sam's precious green pastures! Not *this* sheepherder!"

"You was chancin' that," the old man snapped, "when yuh pointed yore sheep to the forest, without no permit. Anyhow, you could of took yore medicine an' liked it, if it meant bustin' Dollar Sam an' gittin' range."

Jim Tripp lifted his eyes to the moun-

tain country that arose from the Head River cutbanks in a vast green sweep, and his mouth twisted in a smile that was hard and bitter and wise for one of his nineteen years.

The argument was an old one between him and the old man—as old as Dollar Sam's offer to let him on the forest with his herd. And still he could not break the old man's bitter opposition to it.

"I wouldn't never get any range anyhow, Cranky," he said, "the way the forest's run. If it wasn't Dollar Sam graftin', it would be somebody else. Wouldn't ever be me. I can't pay the crooked rangers' price. But I can pay Sam's. An' long as he'll cut me in, I'll pay 'im his price —an' be damn' glad of a chance to."

"All the rangers ain't crooked," Cranky George persisted. "You think the region office would of sent thet new one out an' canned the old one jest at trailin' time, if they hadn't meant to bust Sam? You think Sam would bother to have yuh 'sign yore sheep to him, if thet greencoat down there with him wasn't out fer blood?"

Jim Tripp had thought of that, too. But his mind was made up. "Bigger outfits than mine have gone smash, Cranky, buckin' Dollar Sam. I been a long time gettin' a herd together. I don't aim to lose it for want o' feed. Maybe Sam ain't got that new ranger bought, yet. But he will. An' he'll go on runnin' the forest—"

Cranky George Crowe nodded waspishly. "I'll bet a gut he will, long as you poolers play his game, an' let 'im rob yuh. He wouldn't run it, if you was like yore pa. Yore pa wasn't scairt to stand on his laigs an' fight for what was his."

That reference to his father cut Jim Tripp. It was the first Jim Tripp he'd wanted to emulate, from the first day he'd owned a bum lamb. He'd been bothered lately with the idea that the first Jim Tripp wouldn't have strung along with Dollar Sam. But then the elder Tripp had made a mistake—one which had cost him all his herds, and his life as well.

"Pa put up a fight, when he didn't stand no chance," he reminded bitterly. "Now he's dead. If he'd been smart, he'd of been alive, an' runnin' more sheep than Dollar Sam. I ain't doin' that way. I'm playin' it smart."

"Smart!" Cranky George spat. "You ain't smart! If you knew the meanin' of the word, you wouldn't of signed yore sheep to Dollar Sam!"

"What's wrong with that? Sam signed 'em back. I'll take 'em over, quick as we're off the reserve."

Cranky George snorted in unmitigated scorn. "You goin' to be a mud-headed fool all yore life? What makes you think you'll go on livin' till fall? Think it over. What happens if you should die up here, of sudden death? Ain't Sam holdin' a paper sayin' yore ewes is his? You think Sam'll let seven hundred wet ewes slip through his fingers, when they're his—fer the takin'?"

Jim Tripp was silent a minute. He hadn't thought of that angle, and it did tie in with some of the things he'd heard about Sam Deaver. Still, most of those things he'd heard from Cranky George, and Cranky had no use for Sam. Sam was a sheeper, and a smart one. He was a good 'un to tie to.

But even as he told himself that, Jim Tripp untied his pistol from the saddle latigos, and thrust it through his belt under his shirt.

"I been takin' care myself quite a spell, Cranky—"

"Takin' care yoreself!" Cranky George repeated the words as though they tasted bad to his tongue. "Ten years now I been wet-nursin' yuh, tryin' to make a man of yuh. But I might's well have saved m'self. You'll allus need somebody to lead yuh by the hand, an' wipe yore nose. An' I've had enough!"

Jim Tripp grinned good-naturedly under the old man's biting vituperation, and

tended to his herd. He'd felt the rough side of that horse-rasp tongue many times in the last fifteen years, and he'd learned to pay it no never mind.

Cranky George was the nearest thing he'd known to a dad, ever since a dynamite charge had snuffed out the life of the first Jim Tripp when young Jim was only four—the same charge which cost Cranky George his eye and his arm. Jim Tripp knew the real man under that crabbed, cranky shell. He knew the old man had grounds to be cranky.

George Crowe hadn't always been Cranky George, camp-jack. He'd been Mister George Crowe, with accent on the mister. Pardner with the first Jim Tripp in the biggest sheep outfit in Wyoming. Proud as Lucifer, and twice as rich!

Crowe and Tripp had the world by the tail, people said once, with a downhill drag. But they had made the mistake—in young Jim's eyes—of trying to open the Head River country to sheep over night, instead of taking it easy as Dollar Sam had. And the cowmen's dynamite had wiped them out clean in a single night, there by the lazily coiling Head River.

★

NO CHARGES had ever been filed in that cowardly mass killing. The raiders had all worn gunnysacks over their heads, with holes cut for their eyes, and no one afterwards could identify a man of them. Anyhow, the herders who didn't die along with the old Jim Tripp had made long tracks out of the country.

There had been no witnesses, except George Crowe. George Crowe had stayed around, helping young Jim gather bum lambs and broken mouthed ewes from the desert bands, to start another herd. But George Crowe hadn't had much to say. People wouldn't have listened if he'd had.

George Crowe had turned poison mean after that raid, and people didn't understand it. They said he was tetched, and men who had been proud to call him friend began to fall away from him. They didn't bother any more to put the mister on his name. They called him Cranky George, and let it go at that. They gave him a wide circle when they met him in town. And pretty quick they'd begun to forget him.

Young Jim Tripp didn't forget. Jim was only a shaver when it happened. But he was big enough to see what was in front of his nose, and he knew well enough just how Cranky George was tetched. He'd seen the old man awake night after night for months and years after the raid, sweating over the pain in his missing hand.

"The fingers on thet hand is all cramped down, somewhere, Jimmy," he had complained bitterly, over and over again. "You got to find 'em, an' straighten them out. You got to do it, Jimmy. I can't stand the pain! I can't stand it!"

It was a strange and an eery thing, even to Jim's young mind then, a hand hurting when it wasn't even there. But he knew a man in unbearable pain when he saw one, and he'd searched diligently for that hand, over ground still splattered with his own father's blood.

He never did find it, and Cranky George had gradually stopped fussing over the pain—out loud. But the taut line of his mouth had never relaxed, and his one eye had never lost its pain-haunted glare. And sometimes even now Jim Tripp would hear the old man cursing in the night and beating the stub of his arm against the ground.

It didn't make sense, and Jim Tripp knew it, a man fretting over pain in a hand he couldn't have had—and after fifteen years. But he knew it wasn't an act. And he knew George Crowe had enough to make him cranky and mean as a wounded grizzly. He'd take anything off Cranky George, and take it gladly.

Always in the past he had humored the old man in his moods and wants, and he felt a little guilty about going against his wishes now. But Jim Tripp was the youngest man in the Head River Valley ever to run sheep in his own mark. It was a prideful thing, and he didn't aim to cut off his nose to spite his face.

Sheep was Dollar Sam in that country, and Dollar Sam was sheep. He'd string along with Sam. Someday he'd own a spread as near like the Double-O as he could make it. . . .

It was easy to spot Sam Deaver by his big appaloosa horse, and the forester by his dull green clothes. They sat their horses down by the bridge, one on either side of it, so that the crossing sheep would have to pass between them.

The Black Buck was there, with an old herd pointer goat, and when the leaders had piled up against the bridge, the range boss slipped the goat from its hair rope halter and started it across the narrow span. The leaders followed, and soon the whole band was stringing across.

The forest man had a willow stick in one hand and a jackknife in the other, and for every hundred sheep that passed him, he cut a notch in his tally stick.

Dollar Sam didn't bother to count. Sam knew how many sheep he had his brand on, and the number must have exceeded that allowed in his permit. For he gave Buck Black the high sign, and the Buck straddled his horse, signaled up his dogs with his arms, and rode out to crowd up the drags.

The dogs savvied as well as their master how to jam a herd on the tally. There was no yelling, no barking. But the dogs jammed the herd forward in a wide flying wedge whose point swept past the forest man and onto the bridge.

Some of the flankers were crowded off the high bank, to fall a hundred feet sheer into the water, where the undertow sucked them under like chips. But most of them got inside the pole bridge wings, and the pressure of those behind swept them along onto the swaying plank span.

No man could have gotten an accurate tally on that pushing, crowding herd. But the forester seemed to be doing all right. And if he knew the herd was being jammed, he gave no sign of it.

"You'll be young Jim Tripp!" the ranger said, turning, when the last of the drags were on the bridge. "My name's Ludlow. Joe Ludlow. I'd of known you anywhere. I knew your dad. How are you, Jimmy?"

Jim Tripp sat stiff in his saddle, looking down into the knowingest pair of blue eyes he'd ever seen. The eyes held a twinkle, the wide mouth a turn at the corners, that reached out and offered good feeling and friendship. He was no more than a few years Tripp's senior, and he seemed to be the sort a busted sheeper's orphan with nothing but guts and a start in a hard business would be proud—and lucky—to cotton to.

But the green uniform he wore was, in Jim Tripp's eyes, symbolic of the corrupt administration of the Head River forest, which for ten years had kept his herds off the summer forest range. He calculated he wouldn't like this ranger as a friend.

"Maybe you remember my dad better'n I do," he said, looking past the offered hand. "Maybe you got reason to."

The grin left the forester's face, but the twinkle stayed in his eyes. He pulled the hand back and looked at it.

"Maybe I should have washed it first," he commented good-naturedly, "but I wasn't sure *your* mitts were clean, Tripp. I see sheep in that band wearin' your earmark, and the Double-O brand. I was wonderin' how that happened."

The blue eyes made Jim Tripp uncomfortable, and it occurred to him that maybe the greencoat was really out to smash Dollar Sam. If he could be certain of that,

he knew it would pay him to admit the truth, and take his medicine—as Cranky George had advised. But he knew as well he could never do it, no matter how well it would pay. He'd accepted a favor from Dollar Sam, and passed his word. Anyhow, he owed nothing to this ranger. Not even respect.

"I sold out," he lied, "to Dollar Sam."

The ranger's teeth clicked together, and the friendliness drained out of his eyes. "I reckon you did, Tripp. In more ways than one!"

★

THE forester swung on Sam Deaver then, and his eyes were the blue of new steel. "You're as cagey as they say you are, Deaver. You got a corner on more range than you're entitled to, and you keep the little operators off it by bluff and by blackmailing the district rangers into certifying you're using it all.

"The regional office is onto you. We're going to bust your set-up. The poolers could help us, if they had guts enough to stand up and speak the truth. But it looks like the very men you've been robbing are the first ones to lie for you."

Sam Deaver was a paunchy, red-faced man with protruding mud-brown eyes and a shallow smile. He wasn't smiling now.

"You know a heap," he snarled, "for a greencoat!"

The ranger nodded. "Enough to bust your set-up wide open, whether these poolers lie for you or not. You've overstepped yourself this time. You took in more outside sheep than you had room for in your padded permit. There were fifteen hundred and forty sheep in that last bunch, not counting the nineteen wet ewes your foreman there crowded off into the river. That's three hundred more than this herd allotment is good for, under your permit.

"We'll start there, Deaver. And there are ways of finding who owns these strays that carry your brand."

What happened then came fast.

The ranger was sitting his horse near the edge of the riverbank, with nothing but two feet of crumbling bank and a hundred feet of space between him and the Head River's muddy, treacherous waters. He was watching the herd across the stream as he spoke, his head turned away from Dollar Sam. He was still talking when Sam signaled Buck Black, and the big range boss jumped his red horse suddenly at the forester's smaller blue.

The horror of the thing he was about to witness sent Jim Tripp into action automatically. He had no time to get to his gun. There was only one thing to do, and he did it. He sank his single sheepherder's spur into his buckskin's belly, and jumped her between the ranger and the charging bay. The bay struck the

buckskin a sickening jolt, broadside, hurling her against the ranger's blue. The blue went over the bank.

An unearthly scream broke from man or horse when they felt themselves going over. Then the ranger caught Tripp's buckskin's tail in his clawing fingers and kicked his feet loose from his stirrups. The blue fell from under him, and a great cone of water arose where she struck the river's smooth surface. The ranger hung suspended against the bank, kicking futilely to get a purchase in the hard gumbo with his toes.

The buckskin sagged under Jim Tripp and braced her feet against the added, dead weight. She held, frantically. But it was no use. The bank crumbled under her straining hoofs. Jim Tripp's stomach crawled into a knot.

Fighting down the panic that clutched at him, he jumped to the ground and ran to the buckskin's head. His reins were in his hands, and he sank his boot heels into the soft earth, pulling at her head. For a moment she rocked in the balance. Then she arched her back in a supreme effort, and with Tripp straining at her reins until the blood pounded in his ears, she gave a buck-jumping lunge that carried her up to solid ground.

Jim Tripp's first thought was for the Black Buck. Jim had broken up a murder, cold-blooded and premeditated, and he was wondering why the big range boss had let him do it, when it would have been so easy to have crowded him and the ranger too over the bank.

He looked around, and saw the reason before he saw the Buck. Cranky George Crowe was sitting his old mouse-colored mare on a low grass knoll not fifty yards distant. His old over-and-under gun was leveled between the horse's upright ears.

Jim Tripp grinned in relief, and went to the prostrate ranger, to help him up. But Ludlow shook him off vehemently and gained his feet alone.

"Go on—*shoot!*" the ranger snarled. "Finish what you started, or by the Lord, I'll finish it myself!"

Jim Tripp recoiled from the savage loathing on the forester's face. Then he saw for the first time that his old .44 was in his hand. He was staring at the gun, and wondering when he had drawn it, when Dollar Sam's voice came to him, as if from a great distance.

"That was a hell of a thing to do, Tripp! Now put up your gun. That band o' sheep ain't worth murderin' no man for."

"Murder?" Jim Tripp turned on the big sheeper. "What the hell you talkin' about?"

But he knew the answer, even as he asked the question. There was a leer in Dollar Sam's grin. Then he remembered how the ranger had acted, and the realization came up and hit him, like something solid.

The forester hadn't seen the Black Buck jump his horse at him. He hadn't seen Jim Tripp put his buckskin between the bay and the blue. So he didn't know it was the bay that knocked the buckskin against his horse. All he knew was Jim Tripp's buckskin had crowded his blue over the bank, and Dollar Sam was capitalizing on his suspicion.

"If I'd wanted to kill you, Ludlow," he asked, "why do you think I'd of pulled you back up?"

The ranger shook his head dismally. "There's a lot about you I don't understand, Tripp. But I reckon you wanted to save your horse."

★

JIM TRIPP saw the futility of trying to explain. One look at the strained, panting face convinced him the ranger would believe nothing but the worst about him. He thought of Cranky George, and turned to invite the old

man's testimony on what had happened. But once again Dollar Sam headed him off.

"I felt like hell, Ranger," the big sheeper chirped, "watchin' him ride you down, an' not bein' able to do nothing about it. But Tripp's pardner, that cranky old whipsnake there on the knoll, he had me an' Buck covered. We couldn't do nothing."

"You can save your breath," the ranger snapped. "Tripp works for you, and I guess he didn't think o' that all by himself. I'll see you again, Deaver, about paying for my horse and saddle. I'll see *you* again, too, Tripp! And next time I'll not turn my back!"

"You'll have to hurry, Ranger," Dollar Sam called, "if you see either of these seedy jaybirds around my camp. I'm firin' the pair of 'em."

But the ranger was already stomping off in the direction of his station, down the river. He gave no indication he had heard.

But Jim Tripp heard. His gun came up in his hand. "Just how," he asked softly, "do you figger you'll fire me, Sam—away from my own herd?"

"*Yore* herd?" Dollar Sam laughed. "I got a bill o' sale, sayin' that herd b'longs to me!"

"An' I got one, dated later'n yores, sayin' them ewes is mine!"

Dollar Sam nodded, and his mud-brown eyes held a triumphant gleam. "Shore you have. But you ain't goin' to show it. You're goin' to be facin' attempted murder charges, if I know that ranger. An' you ain't goin' to be claimin' that herd, 'cause that would be admittin' you was trespassin' on the forest when you tried to ride that ranger down. An' you know what that would sound like to a jury."

Jim Tripp's gun was pointed at the big sheeper's middle. "I'm troublin' you for that bill o' sale, Sam. Now!"

"Yo're bluffin'," Dollar Sam taunted. "An' I'm telling you to go to hell, an' you can't do nothing about it. You'd have to shoot me to git that bill o' sale, Tripp. An' you ain't goin' to shoot nobody, with the charges yo're already facin'. In case yo're thinkin' o' tryin' to jump me, I got two boys with Winchesters over the quakers across the river. You start somethin', an' they'll finish it."

Jim Tripp sat like a man slugged. He was beginning to see how neatly Dollar Sam had him boxed. The thing Cranky George had warned him of had already happened. And Sam Deaver hadn't needed to kill him to get it done!

He was seeing something else, too. He was seeing at last how Dollar Sam had made a go of the sheep business. He felt his long-time desire to emulate the big sheeper drain out of him, leaving stubborn and vindictive anger in its stead.

"You're callin' the shots, Sam, for now," he admitted. "But I got seven hundred tight-wooled ewes in that herd. Where they go, I'm a-goin'. An' they ain't goin' back to the foothills!"

Dollar Sam shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You can go where you want, button. But I'll give you a friendly warnin'. You ain't wanted on my range. An' if any accidents should happen over there, why I reckon that ranger wouldn't ask more questions than a man could answer."

The sheeper had stated his warning plainly, and Cranky George edged his mouse mare closer to the bridge, his big gun still leveled at Buck Black. Jim Tripp's gun was covering Dollar Sam, and for a full minute the four of them sat there, eyeing each other and waiting for someone to make the first move.

Sam Deaver and the Black Buck each had their hands on their guns. The Buck had slid his from its holster and was hiding it between his big belly and his saddle pommel, and Dollar Sam had mentioned two dry-gulch killers hid up across the river. But still the sheepman did not

open the pot. It was Cranky George who spoke first.

"Sam, I knowed a man once that wanted a grizzly b'ar. He found a track, an' he follered it a week. Then he give it up an' went home—'cause the track was gettin' too fresh. . . . Yo're follerin' a grizzly b'ar, Sam!"

Dollar Sam guffawed, but his eyes weren't in his laugh. Then he turned his horse and clattered across the swinging bridge. The Black Buck followed, gun in hand, looking over his shoulder as if expecting a shot in the back.

Two men, one of them on a mottled steeldust horse with flax mane and tail, came out of the brush across the river and joined them. They all went up the trail and disappeared into the timber.

Between Jim Tripp and Cranky George, a long moment passed in silence. Then the old man turned on Jim in bitter wrath.

"Wal, you fixed things just fine, didn't you, button? What you aimin' to do now?"

Jim Tripp jerked his head at his scattering sheep band across the stream. "I'm follerin' my sheep to summer grass. An' if Sam Deaver gets in my way, somebody's goin' to get hurt!"

Cranky George looked at him, and the lines in his leathery old face seemed to soften. "Now yo're talkin' like yore dad," Cranky George said. "You sound like a man!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Bitter Trail to Grass

JIM TRIPP had plenty to think about, on the trail up from the Head River bridge to the allotments his herd was to feed. He had his thoughts to himself, too. He didn't see much of Cranky George during the day, and at night they slept and stood watch in turns. Even when they did have opportunity to talk, the old man repelled his efforts at conversation with a grunt and a shrug.

"Wasn't Joe Ludlow the name of the man who was district ranger here fifteen years ago?" he asked the old man, while Cranky was riding with him on the drag.

Cranky George looked straight ahead. "That's right," he said finally. "Ol' Joe Ludlow, this ranger's pa, was the ranger then."

"An' wasn't my dad accused of killin' him—with a shot in the back?"

"That's right," Cranky George repeated, in the same grating, cracked voice. "But it wa'n't true."

The irony of it weighed on Jim—the first Jim Tripp accused of shooting the first Joe Ludlow in the back. The second Jim Tripp accused of riding the second Joe Ludlow over the Head River's steep cutbank, into the river. And if the first charge was as crooked as the second, then the second would be as hard to disprove as the first.

Jim Tripp waited in silence, hoping the old man would say more about that shooting. But when Cranky spoke again, it was not to discuss further the bitter, tragic past. It was to hand Jim Tripp an impatient reprimand, along with a complete change of subject.

"What you settin' there for, like you was growed down? Look at yore sheep up the trail. Scattered hell, west, an' crooked! Whistle yore dogs an' wind them biddies up! Point 'em up the country! You think Dollar Sam ain't goin' to be pickin' up our trail, an' followin' it to the end—for him or us?"

Jim Tripp had long ago learned to accept Cranky's recurrent periods of sour, petulant temper, and to leave him to his brooding at such times. But now something special seemed to be eating at the old man, and he became more cross and snappish by the hour.

At night when he was standing guard, Jim would hear him threshing in his

sougans and pounding the stump of his arm against the ground. And Jim Tripp took heed of the warning.

For a warning it was. As the coming of bad weather is foretold by aches in the joints and old wounds of some men, the coming of bad trouble was portended by increased pain at the end of Cranky's stub arm. It didn't make sense, but Jim Tripp had never seen it fail.

Once or twice, he heard the old man mutter the name of old Jim Tripp in his restless sleep. And this caused him to wonder the more. Cranky George had never directly mentioned the cowman's raid to young Jim in all the years they'd lived as father and son.

What Jim knew of that multiple murder, he'd picked up from the talk of others who recalled it. And there seemed to be a number of angles these sources had avoided speaking of, in his hearing.

He had never heard the straight of the forest ranger's murder, or who had ridden with the cowmen on their bloody night ride. He had heard only how Cranky George had surprised everyone by staying on in the country to help his dead pardner's son build another herd, claiming no part of it for himself. That, and of the change the cowmen's raid had wrought in conditions in the Head River country.

The cowmen seemed to have been shocked and cowed by the very bloodiness of their act, there in the night by the Head River, for never again had they lifted their hands against sheep. Outfits like Dollar Sam's Double-O had followed the ill-fated Crowe and Tripp herds into the country, and none of these had ever suffered harm.

Crowe and Tripp had opened the country up, all were agreed, by the sacrifice they had made. But none of those who followed had felt beholden for the service. No one had ever given young Jim Tripp a hand as he worked at building his herd up from scratch. No one but Cranky George—and Dollar Sam. And Dollar Sam's hand had turned out to be a bear's paw. . . .

They reached the Double-O allotment without hearing from Dollar Sam or the ranger. It was mid-morning when they struck the lower edge of the tract their herd was to graze. Jim Tripp spotted his herd where the sheep would feed the rest of the day without bother. Then, while Cranky George set up his camp, Jim rode south to the adjoining allotment for a confab with Dutch Pringle, pool rancher and Jim's neighbor down in the valley.

Cranky George had set his camp down on a spring in the bottom of a wide spreading canyon when Jim Tripp returned, and in best sheepherder's style, he had built a son-of-a-gun stew to celebrate their arrival on their summer range. The two of them hunkered around the fire outside the tent eating off tin camp plates they held in their laps, and Jim Tripp made his report.

"Dutch signed his sheep to Dollar Sam, same as I did. He says all the poolers signed. He was fit to tie when I told him how Sam had framed me. Dutch is with me, hand an' glove. An' we are goin' to stand up an' kick back before it's too late."

"What," Cranky said sourly, "do you an' Dutch aim to do?"

"Dutch is ridin' a circuit o' the poolers' camps this aft. He's tippin' the boys all off to what Sam's doin'. He's bringin' them all into our camp tonight. We'll decide here, all of us, what's to be did."

Cranky nodded approval. "An' I'll ride down country fer the ranger. You'll all come clean to him about tryin' to slip yore sheep on the forest, without no permits. The *ranger'll* decide what's to be did then. An' you boys will do like he says."

Jim Tripp shook his head, stubbornly. "That greencoat's out of it. You seen how he sided with Dollar Sam down at the bridge, after I'd saved his rubber neck. I want no more to do with 'im. He'd only

make trouble for us over the trespassin'—"

"You'll make trouble for yoreselves," Cranky George snapped, "if yuh go off half cocked an' start another shootin' war on this range. You already got a charge o' 'tempted murder lookin' yuh in the face. You go git a bunch o' men killed up here—even if they're low-down, pizen-toothed lobos like Dollar Sam's crowd, an' you'll be lookin' the hang-noose square in the eye. An' you kin put that in yore pipe an' smoke it!"

"There'll be no killin'," Jim Tripp said. "If us poolers stand together, an' let Sam know it, he won't dare try nothing tough."

★

CRANKY GEORGE growled irately. "You don't know Dollar Sam. Sam's heeled for trouble, an' quick as the sign is right, Sam'll open the pot. The sign'll *be* right, if you poolers gang up an' lift yore heads. Sam'll salt you all away an' claim yore sheep, like he's figgered to from the first. An' with thet ranger thinkin' like he does o' you an' them other poolers, he'd be a mind to believe anything Sam might tell him, of how it started.

"It's time you leave off bein' a gravy-brained idjit, Jimmy. If you'd listened to sense, in the first place, you wouldn't be where yuh are—"

"I cleared with you on throwin' in with Dollar Sam," Jim Tripp said impatiently. "You said it would be all right to take 'im up on his proposition—"

"Shore I did. But I tried to block yuh from stampin' yore biddies with the Double-O brand, an' signin' 'em to Dollar Sam. I seen what Sam was anglin' for. That's why I tipped off the forest—"

"Tipped off the forest—?"

The old man's pale eyes gleamed. "Shore. How you think thet ranger knowed so much, down at the bridge. Why, I been waitin' fifteen years to even scores with Dollar Sam. . . ."

The old man said more. But Jim Tripp didn't hear him. His mind couldn't get past the words *"fifteen years."* . . .

"Cranky, you sayin' that Dollar Sam was mixed up in that cowman's raid?"

Cranky looked at him a minute in silence, as if judging him a final time before speaking. Then he nodded jerkily, and his face darkened with memory. "Dollar Sam got that raid up, Jimmy. He rode at the head of it, an' he set off the dynamite charge that killed yore pa an' knocked off my arm an' took my eye."

Jim Tripp looked at him dubiously. Maybe the Head River men were right, after all. Maybe Cranky *was* touched.

"Dollar Sam was a sheepman. Why would he stir up the cowmen again' sheep?"

"Sam was a cowman then," Cranky George said, and his voice rattled like wind under dead leaves. "But he wanted to run sheep, an' he seen a way to git in the bizness cheap. He was president of the cowman's association, an' when he seen me an' yore pa trailin' into the country, he whipped feelin' up again' us.

"The cowmen didn't like the idee of a shootin' war, so Sam 'greed to ship in paid gun-hands to do the dirty work. Cowmen still held out for no killin', an' Sam 'greed to it. But he give his gunners different word, an' they opened the pot. Then, with blood spilt, the others was in it, whether they liked it or no. They had to go along. Dollar Sam told 'em then they'd have to kill ever'body, so's they'd be no witnesses. An' thet's what they tried to do. They went crazy mad.

"Sam busied the ranchers with the killin'. An' he seen to it his gunners was picked to drive the sheep off the bedground in every camp, to rimrock 'em. But them sheep wasn't rimrocked. They was driv off to Sam's cow ranch, in the dark. Next day, Sam was in the sheep-

raisin' bizness—wide an' handsome!"

Jim Tripp stirred himself. "If you knew all about it, howcome you never did somethin'?"

Cranky George looked at him bleakly. "There wasn't nothing I could do. It would of been my word again' Sam's, an' again' all the liars Sam would of raked up. Anyhow, folks figgered I was tetched. They wouldn't of listened.

"I could of killed Sam, maybe, but I wa'n't the only man gunnin' for him then. Them cowmen he crossed up was after him, too, an' Sam kept a reg'lar army aroun' him all the time. Anyhow, I di'n't want to kill him, till I had busted him, like he had busted me. I bide' my time, an' waited.

"This year, with Sam sellin' you poolers range on the forest, I seen my chance. I knowed Sam would lose all his range rights if he was ketched, an' he couldn't run sheep without grass. I writ a 'nonymous letter to the Cheyenne forest office. They sent young Ludlow out to fire the ranger here, an' to 'vestigate. Ludlow had Sam, dead to rights. An' Sam knowed it. Then you poolers signed yore herds to Sam an' knocked it in the head!"

Jim Tripp swore softly—at both himself and at Cranky George. "Why didn't you tell me b'fore? I wouldn't of signed then."

Cranky George wagged his head. "You'd of had to tell the poolers, an' it would of got around to Dollar Sam, mebbe. I'd waited a long time, Jimmy. I was playin' it close to the board."

Jim Tripp looked in wonder at the old man across the fire. No wonder George Crowe had been cranky and mean since the raid, knowing what he did, and having to play his hand all alone against Dollar Sam's odds. No wonder people thought he was crazy. The wonder was that he *wasn't* touched. And now trouble must be piling up, closer even than Jim Tripp feared.

★

CRANKY'S dinner plate was forgotten and cold in his lap. He was rubbing the stump of his arm, and his old snag teeth were set tight behind his lips.

"You tellin' me how Dollar Sam killed my dad an' stole his sheep—an' sayin' I shouldn't do nothing about it, 'cept go cryin' to the law?" Jim Tripp asked, his words bitter in his throat.

Cranky George wagged his head. "Ain't tellin' you you shouldn't do nothin'. I'm only sayin' you better call in the law, so's it can be in on the kill."

"On the kill?"

The old man didn't elaborate. He continued to rub his arm, but his eye was fixed upon some object on the wooded hillside opposite the camp. His tin plate was still full, but he got slowly up and stepped to the other side of the fire.

He hooked the bail-handled Dutch-oven with his steel hook and lifted it off the coals. The lid came next, and he pretended to be refilling his plate.

"Set tight an' don't look up, Jimmy," he whispered hoarsely from the corner of his mouth. "Got a camp visitor, up in the quakers. He's got a rifle, an' he's squar-

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in' off to send us his callin' card. Git up slow-like an' go over to thet tree where we hung our saddles, like you'd left somethin' there. Git behind the tree an' cut down on them quakers with yore hawg-laig!"

Jim Tripp's scalp tingled, but he kept from looking up the hill. He reached the tree without hurrying, and whipped around it, his .44 in his hand. But he was too late.

Even as he eared back the old pistol's hammer, a high-powered rifle's deep, incisive bark rang out from the side hill. Cranky George jerked sideways, and fell to the ground, almost into the fire.

Swearing softly in his rage, Jim Tripp found the aspen stand and leveled his gun. There was nothing in sight to shoot at, but a thin white puffball of smoke drifted up against the green. He cut down on the brush below that tell-tale wisp, and raked it with a vicious fire.

There was a commotion back in the trees, and he thought for a moment his lead had found its mark. But then a horse burst from the aspen at a run. A man was lying low over its neck, and he didn't ride like a man who'd been gun-shot.

The man he didn't get much of a look at, but the horse was plainly visible. It was a mottled steel-dust gray with flax mane and tail.

The man was already out of pistol range, and Jim Tripp gave up his first intention of catching his horse and offering pursuit. To do so would only be to invite more bushwhacker lead. And he had no rifle to match the drygulch killer's.

"I told yuh thet Sam would open the ball when the sign was right," Cranky George said dryly, behind him. "An' she's opened now. Sam must of got wise it was me tipped the ranger off. 'Cause thet shot had my name on it."

Jim Tripp was surprised to see the old man on his feet again, his full dinner plate still in his hand.

"I thought they got you, Cranky?"

Cranky George grunted. "Reckon he thought so, too. He would of, too, if I hadn't seen the varmint in time, an' put thet fire b'tween us. Heat waves from a fire kin spoil a good aim, on a hot day."

The sound of two more shots came from somewhere down the river. Two shots, evenly spaced, from the same gun. Cranky George nodded, as if the sound had confirmed some thought inside his head.

"Sam's done opened the ball, all right, button. Thet was another high-powered rifle, an' nobody but Sam's own crew carries them kind o' guns up here. Sam seen to thet. The sign must be right, Jimmy—for Dollar Sam. An' now he'll come in fast. If you an' them poolers got any aces up yore sleeve, you better have 'em out!"

Jim Tripp was thinking hard. "The only ace we got is that ranger, Sam," he said. "Could you ride to the station an' have him here tonight?"

Cranky's thin brows went up. "Bring him here?"

Jim Tripp nodded. He said, "Every time I've jumped, Cranky, I've jumped wrong. Now Sam's out for blood, an' us poolers is licked before we start. I want that greencoat here when us poolers hold our pow-wow tonight. We'll all come clean on the trespassin', like you said, an' take our medicine. Then we'll give him all the evidence he needs."

Cranky George's wrinkled old face relaxed in a smile. "Hold yer meetin' open till midnight, Jimmy. I'll have thet ranger here if I got to hawg-tie him an' drag him in!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheeper's Showdown

IT CAME to Jim Tripp after Cranky had gone, that Dollar Sam's gun-hand must have left their camp thinking he'd killed the old man. On the theory

that the sheepman might come by to check up before the poolers arrived, he dug a grave there in the aspens near his camp, and then he filled the hole in again. After which he watched the trail for sign of the poolers riding in.

Night came with a promise of storm, and no poolers showed. Jim Tripp recalled that the two shots he and Cranky had heard earlier had come from the direction of Dutch Pringle's camp, and he began to wonder whether the poolers would be coming at all.

It was ten o'clock by his half-pound sheepherder's watch when the barking of his dogs warned him that something was moving in the dark outside the orbit of his fire. Then he heard horses on the headquarters trail. He knew the poolers wouldn't be coming by that route. And neither would Cranky George.

He threw more wood on the fire, to make a wider light, and stepped back into the shadows.

Headquarters trail crossed a rocky saddle just above camp and, by the sparks their iron-shod feet struck on stone, he counted four horses over the hump. But when Dollar Sam Deaver rode into the firelight, he was alone.

"Just happened to be passin', Jimmy," the sheepman said, when Jim Tripp showed himself. "Thought I'd stop in an' see how you was makin' out."

The sheepman's mud-brown eyes were raking the camp nervously, as if looking for something they didn't see. Then he saw the grave Jim had dug and filled in again, and his eyes glinted in the firelight.

"Where-at's Cranky tonight?"

Jim Tripp jerked a thumb at the new-filled trench.

"How he come to die?"

Jim Tripp shrugged. "Reckon it was lead poison."

Dollar Sam scowled. "An' you buried him without no sheriff's report? Don't you know that's bad bizness?"

Jim Tripp nodded. "Yeah. But so's bein' found with a dead man in camp who's been gut-shot, after I been alone with him for a week."

Dollar Sam looked at him for a long time without saying anything. Then he showed his grin. "What I like about you, Tripp, is yo're smart. Git you away from that cranky ol' warthog that raised yuh, an' mebbeso you'll make a hand."

He raised his voice on that. "Ride in, boys! Few boys rode out with me," he explained to Tripp. "They hung back in the brush a minute. We heard Cranky was layin' for us, an' we took no chances."

Three men rode into the firelight. One was the Black Buck on his tall red horse. The other two Jim Tripp didn't know, but they were no sheep ranch hands. They wore expensive range clothes and high heels and carried two guns apiece. Their hands were long and soft.

One of them had a long scar over one eye, the kind a bullet might leave. He rode a mottled steeldust gray, with flax tail and mane. He looked at the grave with much interest and satisfaction.

"Get down," Jim Tripp said, "an' set. There's coffee in the pot."

The invitation was accepted. The coffee was poured into big tin cups, and Jim Tripp walked to the big trees where the saddles hung and put his back against it. The two gunmen took up positions, one on either side of him.

The Buck and Sam Deaver stood over by the fire. They spoke casually of Cranky George.

Jim Tripp listened for horses on the trail, and wondered why the poolers didn't come.

"Speakin' o' cranky camp-jacks," Dollar Sam put in, "you 'member, Tripp, how pizen mean Pern Atlee's been, since he went deef? He's been pullin' Dutch Pringle's camp, mebbe you knew, an' Dutch, he lost his voice trailin' in, from yellin' so at his sheep.

"Wal, there they was. One couldn't talk, other'n couldn't hear. I figgered they'd be trouble between 'em, an' I talked o' separatin' them. But I was too slow. Cal there was up past their camp today. They'd had a fight, an' shot each other dead. . . . Now ain't that hell?"

Jim Tripp stiffened against the tree behind him. He was remembering the two shots that came from the direction of Pringle's camp that afternoon—two shots from the same gun. He was thinking that two men in a fight wouldn't kill each other with the same gun, in two timed shots. And he was beginning to see why the poolers hadn't showed up.

The poolers would never show up. They hadn't gotten Pringle's message. Dutch had been killed before he'd gotten around to them.

"What's the matter, Tripp? You expectin' Dutch to run some errands or somethin'?"

"I was just wonderin'," Jim Tripp retorted, "if Dutch's bill o' sale of his sheep would still be in his pocket."

Dollar Sam grinned. "Dutch fell mighty close to his fire when he was shot. That paper might of got burned up."

"Like mine will, if I fall over my gun an' get shot, here in my own camp?"

Dollar Sam's grin widened. "Burn the bill yoreself an' ride outa the country, like most of the poolers is doin', an' you might not git shot."

Jim saw the picture then. Dollar Sam hadn't been asleep while he and Cranky were trailing their herd onto their allotment. He'd been making the rounds of the poolers' camps, offering them a chance to burn their herd ownership papers and leave the country—or die.

Dutch Pringle and Pern Atlee had chosen the latter course. Jim Tripp would choose the same. But he'd stall for time. Cranky would be back by midnight.

"I might talk bizness, Sam. How much start do I get, from this camp?"

Sam Deaver nodded his satisfaction and started to say something. But he never got it said. The scar-faced man grunted suddenly and pointed to the empty saddle peg on the tree behind Jim.

"Boys," he said, "you didn't tell me that camp-jack was a Injun!"

Dollar Sam's face was blank. "What the hell—?"

"They was two saddles hangin' in that tree when I triggered—" the man caught himself—"when I was a-passed this camp today. Now they's only one. Tripp wouldn't of planted Cranky's saddle with 'im, would he—without Cranky was an Injun?"

Dollar Sam looked sharp. "You got good eyes, Lefty. I like good eyes in a man. Buck, you slip out an' find the hosses. See if Cranky's mare is gone."

Jim knew Buck would find the horses in a minute and see that the mouse mare was missing. Then, after they'd finished him off, they'd lay a gun-trap for Cranky George and the ranger.

" 'Course Cranky's mare is gone," he said, his voice two jumps ahead of his thoughts. "You think I'd keep her around camp, with Cranky dead here? I throwed Cranky's rig on her an' turned 'er loose, with her reins down. I wanted it to look like whatever happened to Cranky didn't happen here."

Dollar Sam's eyes were hard and bright in the firelight. "Yo're smart, Tripp, like I said. Mebbe yo're too smart. I don't like that. Buck, leave the hosses go. You an' Lefty an' Cal take that camp shovel an' open up that grave. Scoop it wide an' deep. 'Cause if Cranky ain't in it, we'll put it to use."

★

IT WAS eerie and nerve-rubbing for Jim Tripp, sitting there helpless and seeing his own grave prepared. The steady sound of the camp shovel striking

rock began to wear on him, and he couldn't take his eyes off the growing heap of fresh dirt.

He stood stiffly upright against the fir tree. His hand had crept inside his shirt front to grip the pistol there. His palm was damp against the old wooden grips.

Finally he had to admit to himself that Cranky and the ranger wouldn't make it in time. The admission made, he adopted a plan. He would drop Sam Deaver first, when the time came, and go on from there. . . . He'd make a fight for it. Maybe Cranky and the ranger would be near enough to hear the shooting. They'd be warned then, anyhow.

Then it came. The shoveling ceased suddenly. A voice said, "They ain't any stiff in this hole!"

Jim Tripp didn't know the hills could be as silent as they were for a minute, until Dollar Sam's voice broke it. "Start talkin', Tripp!"

There was nothing, as Jim Tripp saw it, to say. He'd just heard his death sentence spoken from that open grave, and he aimed to let the gun inside his shirt do all his talking for him. He raised his eyes to meet the sheepman's, and he saw firelight glint on steel among the quakers.

His eyes strained out into the gloom, and he could see the stooped form of Cranky George standing there. The form at his side wasn't so distinct, but Jim Tripp knew it would be the ranger.

The young sheeper moved his eyes quickly so as not to give it away. He looked at Dollar Sam, and an idea came.

"Cranky rode down to see the ranger, Sam," he said, determined to give the ranger an earful, to save explanations later. "Likely told the ranger all about it by now. About how you sold us poolers range on the forest, then bluffed us into signin' our sheep over to you. About how Buck tried to ride him into the river, too. An' how you framed it onto me, after I'd busted it up.

"That's about all, Sam. Except I wouldn't be su'prised if the ranger knew about you killin' Dutch Pringle an' Pern Atlee, too."

Dollar Sam's eyes went dead as his voice. "It won't do the ranger much good —whatever he knows. We're takin' care o' him tonight, too. But thanks for tellin' me, because it changes my plans. I'd aimed to plant you in that hole you dug. Now I reckon we'll take you along down to the station, an' shoot you there—along with that nosey greencoat.

"That'll make it look like you an' him had a quarrel, Tripp. I've already passed the word on how you tried to git 'im once. Was figgerin' on somethin' like this, all along. I'll figger somethin' good for Cranky. I been waitin' fifteen years to close his account, an' I'm lookin' forward to doin' it."

"You ain't got to wait any longer, Sam," Cranky's voice intruded from the aspens. "You kin start closin' now, any time!"

Dollar Sam turned stiffly and stared at Cranky George and the ranger, who were advancing into the firelight, their guns in their hands. One of the gunmen climbed out of the trench and sided the Black Buck, watching. The other remained in the open grave.

Nobody at the fire moved as the two came nearer. And Cranky George chuckled. "You got another account to close out now, Sam. I jus' been tellin' Ludlow here how you killed his pa, fifteen years ago, to open the jackpot in the Head River War."

Dollar Sam had recovered from his initial surprise, and had got himself in hand. He laughed hollowly. "Hell, Cranky, all the country knows yo're tetched. I had no reason to start a war again' sheep. I run sheep m'self—"

"We won't go into thet," Cranky George snapped. "I've explained all about thet to Ludlow, an' to Jim there, too. You

killed Joe Ludlow, because as ranger he come out in favor of lettin' Crowe and Tripp sheep on the forest, an' the cowmen went along with him. Thet's what he rode out to tell me an' Jim on the day he was shot."

The old man's voice was barely audible now. His one eye, plunging into the sheepman's wide gaze, was reduced to a single toneless gleam.

"Joe Ludlow knocked the props from under yore range war, Sam. You had to think o' somethin' good. That somethin' was Ludlow himself. You shot 'im in the back, an' spread the word it was Jim Tripp 'cause Jim didn't like the ranger's deal. You said Jim wanted to spot his herds down on the range meadows. An' thet way, you got yore war!"

All the bluster, the bluff, and the self-assurance drained out of Dollar Sam. He was up against it and he knew it.

Cranky George laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "I wanted to see you broke, Sam, before I killed yuh. I wanted to see you sweat an' crawl b'fore I paid you off!"

"Then why you jumpin' me now? I ain't broke. I ain't crawlin'!"

"Yo're broke all right, Sam. Yo're done! Your outfit's gone. Me an' young Ludlow here, we swung a deal t'night. You stole twelve thousan' sheep from Crowe an' Tripp fifteen years ago.

"Ludlow's seein' thet twelve thousan' sheep comes back to Crowe an' Tripp. Twelve thousan' blatters, Sam, from the Double-O herds, an' enough forest grass to graze 'em, after yo're dead an' gone. Thet's fer the help I give him in smashin' yore hook-up, Sam."

"So it *was* you that tipped the forest off?"

Cranky George nodded, gripping his old gun. And he must have been blinded for the moment by hate and triumph, for he didn't seem to notice that the sheepman's eyes kept sidling to the open grave.

Jim Tripp noticed, and he noticed why. The scar-faced gunman was still in the grave, unseen and forgotten. His gun was trained on Cranky George's head. He was watching Dollar Sam for a sign.

Jim Tripp froze. His hand was still on the gun inside his shirt. But he knew that if he moved or yelled, the hidden gunner wouldn't wait for Dollar Sam's command to shoot. And Dollar Sam was lifting his empty hand in a signal.

Jim Tripp let out one wild yell and jumped straight at Dollar Sam. He struck the big sheeper in the midriff and knocked him into Cranky George, sending them both to the ground. Then all hell broke loose in the sheep camp.

Every man in the camp was geared to shooting tension. And everyone seemed to shoot at once. The gunner who'd stood alongside Buck Black had both his guns out, shooting at Cranky. Both barrels in Cranky's old over-and-under let go with a roar, and the gunner folded in the middle and went down.

Dollar Sam was up on one knee, shooting blindly. Jim couldn't see the ranger or the Black Buck, but he could see the man in the grave. That one was shooting as fast as he could thumb his gun at Cranky George, and Cranky was rolling toward the shelter of a rotten log.

The roaring clamor must have jangled the gunner's nerves, for Cranky reached the log unscathed. Jim Tripp shot the hidden gunner through the head. As he did so, something hot slammed into his right shoulder, spinning him around.

He saw Dollar Sam throw down his empty gun then and grab up the camp axe from the wood pile. Jim tried to lift his gun, but his arm was dead. He changed hands and triggered a quick shot.

Dollar Sam lurched, and a red blotch jumped onto his shirt just under his heart. Then the sheeper righted himself, and came on. The firelight danced on the axe-bit as he swung it.

Jim Tripp had three more slugs in his gun. He fired them all into the big sheeper's chest, and a silver dollar would have covered the single wound they made. But still Sam Deaver came on, unyielding, refusing to die.

The sheepman was within axe range of Jim Tripp then, and the bit flashed up and down, but the blow was slow. Jim Tripp stepped to one side. The axe missed him and chopped down into the ground. Dollar Sam fell on top of it. Jim stood ready to kick the weapon from his hand. But he didn't need to. Dollar Sam was dead.

Jim Tripp looked about him. The camp was a shambles, but the fight was over. He never did learn how the Black Buck had gotten the drop on the ranger. But young Ludlow was on the ground, a .45 caliber hole in his shoulder. The Buck was stretched out beside him, bloody and still. Cranky George was wiping his red-stained hook on the Black Buck's hat.

Jim Tripp looked back at Dollar Sam, and he felt a sudden respect for the old sheeper. He'd been a tough one. His heart must have been blasted to shreds before he fell.

"Sheep kings die hard, button!" old Cranky George snapped, as if it were something even a schoolboy should know.

Looking at him, Jim Tripp grinned. "An' some don't never die, Cranky," he said.

They cleaned up the camp as best they could. Jim Tripp tied up the ranger's shoulder, and the coffee pot was on the coals. They sat about the fire until morning, sipping the scalding liquid. And Jim Tripp felt a glowing warmth.

"When you make out thet new forest grazing permit," he heard Cranky George tell the ranger, "make it to Crowe an' Tripp, jest like the first one was. Long as I got to ride herd on Jimmy the rest o' my life, I might's well have him where I kin watch him along with my sheep."

The old man's voice was dry and stinging as ever. He was looking into the fire and gently rubbing the stub of his arm. Jim Tripp feared for a moment that it might mean more trouble was on the way. But then he saw that he was wrong.

For the first time in all the years that Jim had known him, Cranky George was smiling!

THE END

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BULLWHIP GOES TO HELL!

By Tom Roan

Crash Fowler, blackleg sheriff, gave Bullwhip Bill McCrackin a warm welcome to White Water. . . . But he made one sad mistake when he thought that the bellowing blacksnake man was the kind to help him burn farmer's homes over their heads, string up honest men as rustlers, or send bushwhack bullets in the backs of ranchers who'd neither scare nor run!

They were like wildcats, opening up with rousing bursts of gun-thunder. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Robbed

IT WAS more than an hour before sundown when Bullwhip Bill McCrackin's old Gabriel's Trumpet climbed the last sagebrushed bench of foothills, and the great trees around the waterhole loomed tall and green ahead. Just beyond them were the mountains, as green as emeralds all along their high, abrupt slopes in the lowering light, until the surrounding forest struck the timberline to make room for the bald domes crowned with snow.

The old white horse slung up his head, cocked his ears, and nickered as loudly as a stallion greeting a dozen mares. McCrackin was jolted back to life. He had

been lazily dozing for almost an hour. Now he wiggled back his slumped shoulders, straightened his stumpy figure in the old Mexican saddle, and took a new interest in his surroundings as he pulled off his hat to allow the wind to blow through his thin hair.

It was going to be a cracker-jack place to camp for the night—'way up high, and far off from everybody. It looked even more promising when he rode in under the great old trees and slid out of his saddle. The water was cold and deep as it lay in its long, coffin-shaped pool rimmed with white sand and rocks.

Man and horse drank at once, side by side as they always drank when on the trail. There was grass here, good and deep like the water, and as McCrackin arose to wipe his lips on the back of his hand he saw his supper staring stupidly at him from a dead cottonwood limb fifteen feet above his head.

Of all the big grouse in Montana, the fool hen was the dumbest of the lot. Two of them sat there on the limb. Once off the ground something in their foolish make-up charmed them into a spell of arrogant security. They sat, they stared. If a man shot at close range and missed they were often accommodating enough to wait for a second, sometimes a third and a fourth shot.

McCrackin eased back and reached up to his saddle where his old twenty-foot blacksnake whip lay coiled around the horn. He took it down quietly, then streaked it forward like lightning leaping from his hand. The rawhide lash struck the first fool hen on the side of the head, and down she came.

The second one simply looked down as if wondering where the other was going. Before that dumb bird had time to make up its mind as to what was happening, it was falling as the whip cracked like the heavy explosion of a .45.

Not once did the feeling come to McCrackin that he was being watched by anything other than a few wild pigeons high in the trees. The fool hens were nice and heavy. One of them was big enough for a glutton to take on at one sitting. He could eat one for supper and save the other for breakfast. He lopped off their heads and hung the birds on a lower limb while he gave his attention to unsaddling and turning the white horse loose to graze

He was hungry, tired and still sleepy, but he took his time. Fool hens were danged good eating. He cleaned them with the utmost care, and left them in the cold water to cool while he kindled a little fire. His old saddle pockets gave up a coffee pot and a frying pan. He salted one of his birds and peppered it. Leaving the other in the water he finally had his entire evening meal on the fire to slowly simmer and cook until everything was just right.

It was then that Bill McCrackin did the wrong thing.

★

BULLWHIP lying in a glistening black coil in the grass beside him, he laid aside his hat and propped his broad old back to a rock just to ease the ache in his tired bones. He did not intend to go to sleep. He knew darned well he was not going that far—not with a fine fool hen cooking and a coffee pot beginning to simmer right in front of his hungry eyes! Yet it was exactly what he did do. His eyes drooped, his lips slacked and he was gone like a man slowly sinking into a dead-dark well.

An hour passed before he moved. Birds chirped above his head. Many flocks of doves came in for water and their nightly roosting places high in the trees. McCrackin's old ears might have heard them, his subconscious mind might have tried to arouse him to the tragedy that was taking place to his supper, but he slept on.

A thin-faced boy of twelve finally stepped noiselessly from the brush on the other side of the waterhole. He was a red-headed, barefooted raggamuffin in patched blue overalls. A threadbare black shirt, torn in many places, covered the upper part of his body. An old black hat, many times too large for him, sat on the back of his head.

Strung around his lean waist and held up with calico strings over his shoulders was a big cartridge belt on which hung an old Smith & Wesson five-shooter.

He stared at the sleeping man a long time and listened to his heavy snoring before he came easing forward, one eye still watching McCrackin, the other hungrily focused on the cooking bird and the coffee pot.

It took a yellow-striped hornet and a black honey bee to break McCrackin's deep sleep. They plunged out of the trees, rolling over and over in a locked-together fight. Each insect was trying to drive home its stinger into the other when they struck, landing squarely on the top of the sleeping man's big nose. There each insect let go, driving its stinger into the soft flesh.

A bee sting could make a grizzly wail, and a hornet could put an elephant on the run. McCrackin had received the business ends of both. He arose with a yell, both hands fighting the air in front of his face. He was neither tired nor sleepy now. A glance showed him the insects back in the air and still trying to fight in spite of each having broken its stinger off deep in the big nose.

McCrackin headed for the water, stumbling blindly, the tears beginning to pour down through the short stubble of gray beard covering his ruddy face. He was hurt, danged bad hurt, and his cursing could have been heard a full half-mile away.

At once his nose had started to swell, getting larger and larger like a fiery red ball in front of his face. After a time he managed to pick out the stingers with the aid of a round pocket mirror the size of a dollar and a keen-tipped blade of his old pocket knife, but even then the pain did not leave and the swelling refused to stop.

His troubles were just beginning. When he was finally able to turn to his supper he took only one step toward the fire and stopped. The frying pan was empty. The coffee pot stood to one side of the fire. A shake told him it was empty, and then he saw the bones of the fool hen scattered in the grass, each picked and gnawed as clean as a hound's tooth.

"That's the most unfillin' fool hen I ever et," he growled as he rubbed his belly. He looked at his fingers. There was no grease on them. He licked his lips, but if there had been grease there he could not have tasted it. His nose was burning and still swelling. Then, wiping the tears out of his eyes, he looked in the water—and saw that the second fool hen had disappeared.

"The birds didn't do it," he scowled, blinking at the gone-out fire, "an' I didn't do it. An'," he looked thoughtfully at the water, "there ain't no alleygators in all Montana, an' it'd take almost that to swallow that bird what was in the water, big as it was. Some two-legged critter's jobbed me on this deal. Listen, yuh!" He lifted his voice to a sudden roar as he glared across the pool. "Who are yuh an' where are yuh?"

"Listen, yuh!" answered a strange, far-ringing voice. "Who are yuh an' where are yuh?"

"I'm right here!" McCrackin was fighting-mad now. "Right here, yuh bow-legged, lantern-jawed camp-robber. Come down an' fight. If yuh got a streak of man in yuh—"

He cut himself short, mouth and lower jaw sagging, even the swelling nose forgotten for the instant. His own voice and his own words were coming back to him

in an eery echoing from a low line of blue-gray cliffs hugging the timbered slopes above him.

The thundering report of a shot followed that. With it came a wail of terror, the echoing reports of both sounds rocking back and forth in a wild ringing from the cliffs.

★

"I WAS watching it all through my telescope!" The voice on the slope was high and bullying, the echoes double-ringing it along the cliffs and down on the flat below. "Kid or no kid, a thief's a thief, and you're going to be treated like one!"

"Don't—don't hit me agin, yuh mean ol' devil!" A thinner, sharper voice was wailing now, crying out in both terror and pain. "I was hungry, an'—an' grandma's hungry, too! We ain't had nothin' but ol' green soup for a week. I got tired of mustard greens an' wild onions picked off the crick banks. Don't—don't hit me ag'in, Crash Fowler! I'll be a man some day, an' I'll kill yuh when I grow up!"

"I'd dash his brains in, I would!" shot in a heavier voice. "I'd smash his skull an' throw 'im to the buzzards right here an' now without more foolin' with 'im!"

"Swing 'im up in front of you!" ordered the first speaker. "We'll take a gander at that squirt at the waterhole. He looks like a cowboy. If he ain't—"

The man left the rest unsaid, and McCrackin heard horses coming on down a ragged little trail on the slope. He heard somebody sobbing, then he caught a glimpse of the first rider. It was the figure of a powerful, sandy-haired man of forty, mounted on a head-slinging, bald-faced bay.

That first glimpse told McCrackin that the man was one of those fancy-dressers—tight-fitting doeskin pants, a blazing red shirt loud enough to be seen forty miles away, a great brown hat, and a black and white-spotted calfskin vest. A big silver chest, and two silver-mounted .45's hung in elaborately stamped cartridge belts and star glittered on the left side of his brawny holsters at the man's hips.

Now the second rider was breaking into sight. Mounted on a big iron-gray, there was nothing fancy about that one. Buckled face-downward across the saddle in front of him rode the sobbing youth. The man was big, wide-chested and garbed in black. A close-lying black beard covered his face.

At his hips rode black .45's, pulled well backward so that the sobbing youth in front of him would not be able to reach up suddenly and snatch one of them from their holsters. On his half-ragged black vest gleamed a small, ball-pointed star.

"Howdy, stranger!" The fancy one on the bay spoke as he jerked his horse to a halt, and the words seemed to fall out of his mouth like slats from a crate. "I'm Fowler—Crash Fowler, sheriff of White Water, twelve miles up in the hills. Second man's Walt Bender, my deputy. Who're you? Where are you going—and why and what for are you going?"

"Howdy!" snapped back McCrackin, trying to be just as quick with his tongue. "Don't know that it matters who yuh fellas are. I know White Water ain't too far away. Aimed to get on there in the mornin'. Name ain't nothin' to brag about. Don't exactly know where I'm goin'. Say!" His eyes, suddenly as hard as reddish marbles had swept on to the second man. "Quit tryin' to twist that boy's neck off! Yo're *some* kind of a man, ain't yuh?"

"Don't know," sneered the second horseman, "whether it's any of yore damn business or not." He gave the boy a sudden sling that flung him cringing to the ground with an old cartridge belt around him and its empty holster flapping. Then, reaching behind him, he flung McCrackin the picked fool hen that had been taken

from the water. "There's yore bird, smart one! An'," he reached behind him again, "here's yore saddle pockets!"

Plucked bird and saddle pockets fell at McCrackin's feet. He turned and looked owlishly at his saddle. It was the first time that he had noticed that the saddle bags were missing.

"I gotta hand it to yuh, kid." He scratched his head, then stooped to pick up his old hat and gave his neatly coiled bullwhip a flip around his right shoulder. "Looks like yuh shore did clean me, don't it?"

"I—I was hungry, mister," whimpered the boy, still cowering there on the ground beside the black-bearded man's horse. "I—I ain't no thief. Honest, I ain't! I come here hopin' I could kill some birds an' maybe a rabbit with rocks. I saw yuh. Yuh looked like a cowboy, an' I was scared. Then yuh got to snorin', an' that fool hen smelled so good I couldn't stop. I—I et it, mister. I took the one out of the water for Grandma. Then—then I saw yuh had a slab of bacon an' some coffee an' a little poke of flour in yore saddle bags. I—I took 'em. But I ain't no *regular* thief. Honest, I ain't, mister!"

"He's a dirty little liar!" snarled the deputy. "We make examples of his kind in this country. An' sometimes," his little black eyes narrowed, "we make examples of fellas who're too damn smart when they come among us. Sheriff Crash Fowler asked yuh some questions, fella. Yo'd better start talkin'."

"That's what yuh call an order, I reckon?" McCrackin had seen blood on the side of the boy's mouth. "An' I reckon—from what I heard the little fella yellin'—it musta been this clothes-hoss sheriff what hit 'im?"

"We didn't come here to answer questions, stranger!"

The sheriff answered him, leaning lazily forward now, left forearm on his saddle horn, the thumb of his right hand hooked over one of his heavy belts near the holstered Colt at his hip.

McCrackin noticed then that the man's eyes were actually red; they reminded one of rubies staring at him. On the man's face was a cruel little smile with gold-capped teeth showing through his warped lips.

"We sometimes ask questions before putting handcuffs on a man and taking him to White Water to find out about him. In my jail I *find* out! I had to fire a shot over that kid's head up there to keep him from pulling that old gun on me, and then I found that it was empty and not a shell in his belt. I'm taking him in, for stealing. If you don't want to go along to jail with him, then you'd better be careful with your lip."

"That's the law talkin', I reckon?" grimaced McCrackin.

★

FOWLER lifted his right hand and jabbed his star with his thumb, then dropped the hand back to his belt with those two little red eyes glittering like a cat's. "It's the Law, all right! . . . You look like a cowboy. We're pretty good to cowboys in these parts—if they're the right kind of cowboys, and stay that way when they get here."

"Yeah—yeah," sputtered in the boy. "If yo're the kind of a cowboy who'll kill for Pink Hawley's mob! If yo'll burn folks' homes when they're asleep! If yo'll take folks out an' hang 'em for rustlers when they ain't done a thing!

"That's the kind of cowboys he wants, mister!" The boy stumbled to his feet. McCrackin expected either the big deputy or the sheriff to try to stop him from talking, but neither man moved. "Folks have been here for years before Pink Hawley come to White Water. Nobody bothered 'em. Cowboys used to come by an' eat with us—with me an' grandpa an' grandma. A cowboy learned me how to make flutter-mills in the crick an'—an' willow

whistles an' willow sprig traps. Pink Hawley run them kind of men outa the country. They wasn't mean enough! He wanted men who'd shoot an' burn, like they shot grandpa an' burned our house!"

"Go on, go on," evilly grinned the sheriff as the boy paused for breath. "You're doing well! His name," he was watching McCrackin's face, "is Buck Lee. Lives up the big valley you get to through a break in the hills behind us. Fine *cattle* country; no good for damned farmers."

"An' yo're lettin' 'im tell me," nodded McCrackin, "just what kinda men yuh like in this country, huh? In other words, yo're lettin' 'im ask me if I'm yore kind of folks or his kind?"

"I'm not saying anything." A cold glint of diabolical laughter seemed to be shining in the sheriff's eyes now. "Draw your own conclusions, stranger. You don't look like a damned farmer!"

"Nope, I'm no farmer," agreed McCrackin, "though I was born an' sorta dragged up by the ears on a farm. I'm a cowboy, bronc twister—anything that goes with cows."

"Anything?"

"Yeah." A soft, steel-like purring had come into McCrackin's tone. "Anything except plain murder an' burnin' folks out. Anything, yeah," his right hand was beginning to fondle the butt of his whip, "except hidin' behind a damn badge an' beatin' up kids!

"Easy, now!" With an oily-like movement that was as swift as a diving and upflinging bat, an old .45 had come into McCrackin's left hand, its ugly muzzle weaving to cover both men. "Just set. I see what yuh aim to do, both of yuh. Yo're the kind, sheriff, who'll set an' grin at a man, propped forward easy-like, an' 'fore he knows it yo've either shot 'im or got a gun on him."

"That's right, mister!" squawked the boy, stumbling to one side to get out of the way. "Crash Fowler's shot a lot of men like that. He allus leans that way on his saddle horn an' smiles when he's only waitin' to catch yore eye off guard so he can flip a gun down on yuh! Watch 'em both, mister! *Watch 'em!"*

"You're a fast old bird, stranger." The sheriff was straightening, carefully lifting his hands. "There's two to one, though. Better remember that, old bird."

"Don't keep callin' me old bird!" snarled McCrackin. "Yuh ain't no robin red-breast, yoreself, in spite of yore fancy clothes. Dressed up or not, yuh'd still have certain looks about yuh to remind a man of a bald buzzard that some folks don't know no better than to call an eagle. An' as far as yore pard, look at 'im! His hands went up like a billy goat's tail in a hot pepper patch."

He moved toward them watchfully. In a few moments he had slipped the big six-shooters out of their holsters and had thrown them in the waterhole. Running his hands over them and satisfied that they were not carrying any other weapon, he stepped back, holstering his old Colt.

"Now clear out back to yore White Water," he told them. "I've been hearin' a lot about yuh, Fowler, before I come up over the Wyomin' line. What I heard ain't good. I ain't exactly lookin' for trouble, but a man who'd hit a boy like yuh did—well, hell, don't yuh reckon he oughta have a taste of it 'imself?"

His right hand swept to his shoulder. The bullwhip streaked forward. He was at the proper distance, and the lash crashed like a high-powered rifle just under the sheriff's nose. With a howl the man slammed both hands to his face, the quick blood showing through his fingers as his horse wheeled with him.

Deputy Walt Bender was already whirling his horse. For a moment he was high in his stirrups and his big, startled hulk tilted forward over the horn. The whip shot like a glistening snake for a second target. It lapped over the cantle of the

saddle like a furious tongue, and caught the deputy a hard, slashing blow across the tight seat of his trousers.

Wild stallions could not have carried men away any faster. Horses snorting, both men howling in pain, they plunged into the brush with the noise of bull-elephants charging through a dry canebrake as they headed back for the safety of the slopes.

"I'm afire!" yelled the deputy. "I'm afire!"

"Keep a-burnin'!" bawled McCrackin, lifting a .45 to throw four shots in the air. "I'll set *yore* house afire next time!"

"They — they'll get yuh, mister!" warned the boy. "They'll come back with half of White Water behind 'em!"

"Well," McCrackin scowled, "let 'em come! Some folks say I ain't happy unless I'm in trouble. I like it best, I reckon, when it gets somewhere right around eyeball-deep. An' this smells like it's goin' to be that way."

CHAPTER TWO

A Badman for White Water!

WALT BENDER was actually afire—no foolish mistake about that! Crash Fowler saw smoke pouring from the right hip pocket of the man's trousers as he plunged ahead of him on his iron-gray. It proved that a man could get himself into trouble by always carrying a block of Chinese matches in a hip pocket.

The long lash of the whip had struck just right. It had ignited one or two of the matches in the block, and the rest had immediately taken fire. Howling louder with pain and slapping furiously at his seat at every springing leap of his horse, the man's entire pocket had burned away before he put the fire out.

Ordinarily, Crash Fowler would have filled the slopes with roars of laughter, but the underside of his nose and upper lip had been split and the blood was still pouring in ugly little streams. The tingling pain started him to break into one fit of sneezing and violently cursing after another. A man with such jumpy, aggravating pains could not have seen anything to laugh at in a barrel of monkeys.

"Pull up!" he snarled, swinging his own horse around when they had reached a high, safe place where they could look back and see all that was going on below. "I'm so damned mad I could shoot my own mother's head off her shoulders! I told you to watch the fool, and you sat there wallowed back in your saddle like a dummy in a circus while he got the drop on us!"

"Je-rusalem!" groaned the deputy, still trying to inspect the big, dark hole where his pocket had been. "Burned through drawers an' all! I've got a burn as big as my hand. I can feel the blister arisin'. But—but don't get mad at me, now!"

He threw up his hand as if he had just realized what the sheriff had been saying to him. "I—I ain't too much to blame, for yuh usually do the shootin', Crash. I never thought anybody—*anybody,* Crash, —could beat yuh settin' in yore tilt so easy-like with yore hand just about on the butt of yore gun."

"He's fast!" The sheriff was staring back down the slope. "I misjudged him. Thought he carried those big guns just for show. Most men of his age do carry them for that. And then there was that whip—that damned whip! Man, he's faster'n hell!"

He touched his nose and mouth tenderly, and then broke into another fit of bitter cursing and sneezing that scattered drops of blood all over his horse's mane and shoulders. It was almost a minute before he could control himself, then rise in his stirrups to look down through the timber again.

Buck Lee seemed to be doing very well

for himself down there. The bullwhip man was saddling his horse. He swung up, then helped the boy up behind him. In the yet-bright twilight now the sheriff watched them ride away. They stopped before they had gone far, and the boy scampered down eagerly to go looking for something in the brush.

"He's hunting that old gun you threw now." The sheriff spoke with his hand to his nose. "Yes, and the ragged little brat has found it! There he goes, scampering back up behind the saddle again like a devilish monkey! I'll watch 'em as long as I can. You ease back to the waterhole and get our guns. The water's clear as a mirror even if you have to dive for them. It'll cool that blister I see back there trying to outgrow the saddle cantle through your pants."

Bender hesitated. He mumbled something about the bullwhip man taking a sudden notion to swing back to the waterhole, then he turned reluctantly and rode back down the slope. As he rode he held his right hand carefully thrust down behind him as a prop to keep his blister from rubbing the saddle. Fowler grinned twice in spite of his aching nose and lip.

He did not have to change his position very far to be able to continue to watch the man and boy below. They passed through a brush-grown, tree-choked break in the wall of a towering ridge.

Ahead of them now was North Moon Valley. Its high slopes fell back at once into a deep basin twenty miles long and seven miles wide, and well-watered by rousing little creeks that came bubbling up out of the ground from the great springs dotting its fertile floor.

North Moon Valley had always been a prize to make the eyes of some cattlemen blaze, but it had its one drawback. For the cattleman running big herds it was too far from the rest of the surrounding rangelands, locked over beyond the high mountain ranges at either side. A good-sized herd could be fattened in the valley from early spring until fall, but the long drive over the hills always took the fat off of them, and no cattleman wanted that to happen to his steers.

Farmers had done well in the valley, and the majority of old cattlemen of the hills considered them an asset to their rangelands. They were always there to drive stray herds back where they belonged when they wandered over from the east or west. For that service they had never asked for pay, and had refused it when it was offered to them. It eliminated the necessity of the cattlemen hiring men to sit around in line cabins all spring and summer just to watch the slopes.

The valley was fire-splotched and black-squared in many places now where houses and fields had been. Many things had happened down there. Farmers had been wiped out, shot, burned out and run out. They had had no fences except for pastures for their own livestock. Open water was everywhere, and no one could accuse them of hogging it.

It had not been exactly an easy matter to pick a fight with them. But men could be accused of anything, and murdered in cold blood, providing courts were in their favor—and any man could buy such things with either votes or money.

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FOWLER sat there, constantly dabbing at his nose and lip with a handkerchief. He watched the bullwhip man and the boy with cold red fury in his eyes and murder on his mind until they were out of sight, and then turned back to start bellowing and hurling oaths down the slope for Bender to hurry up his job.

Bender was taking a hell of a time to recover the six-shooters. He answered each time the sheriff yelled for him, and his voice was always the same, sounding like the long-shuddering hooting of a

great owl. Fowler rolled a cigarette, lit it, and was about to ride back to see what was keeping him when he saw the man coming.

"Why didn't you pitch yourself a camp down there?" snarled the sheriff. "You were gone long enough."

"But I got 'em," grinned the deputy sheepishly, "an' for once I didn't mind cold water." He handed the sheriff his hand-engraved weapons. "Dry 'em off an' oil 'em up proper, an' they're good as new. If I ever got my paws on guns as fine as them I'd keep 'em. Wouldn't throw 'em away like that fella did. But that cold water on the right place shore did feel mighty good. Ever get burned like that?"

"No," growled the sheriff as he slipped his big weapons back into their holsters. "I was never damned fool enough to carry a block of Chinese matches in my pants. I've never yet seen such a jackass as you can turn out to be at times, Walt, but you'll probably learn some sense by the time somebody burns your hat off and singes your eyebrows."

"I'll be all right," grimaced Bender, "when I get some butter or hawg grease on me an' set for an hour or two on a hunk of ice. Cripes!"

They rode on, the sheriff watching the valley dropping deeper and deeper below as they mounted higher slopes. The long twilight was still bright as always in the high country. With his own six-shooters back in their holsters and his dripping clothing cooling him where he was the warmest, some of Walt Bender's spirits had picked up.

"We'll get 'im," he swore from time to time. "Nobody gets outa our fingers when we don't want 'em gettin' out, Crash. I'd like to tie that duck down on his back an' burn his tongue out. All I want is just to see 'im one more time. Once more an' yo'll see me blowin' lead in his belly."

But neither the sheriff nor his deputy wanted to push their horses into a faster pace. Walt Bender whined of the pain each time his iron-gray started to break into a trot.

They kept the horses at a walk as if each man dreaded entering town to report his troubles, and they were three times as long as they should have been in getting back. Twilight died, and darkness settled deep and black over the hills as if to hide some of their shame.

The yellow lamplight of White Water showed ahead when they reached the top of the last long slope.

It was in the almost exact center of an unusually high tableland where a great artesian spring came boiling out of the ground in the middle of it with the white water as large around as the body of a horse leaping yards into the air and mushrooming down out of a rock-encrusted hole in the earth.

Years later, people might call White Water a health resort, but it would be long after the going of the six-foot, six-inch, baby-faced Pink Hawley, past-master gambler, dive-keeper, and self-annointed king of all the surrounding country. His place —the two-story, log-and-stone Dancing Girl—stood at the head of the street, blocking the entire upper end of it.

The author of this lusty tale of the turbulent West, Tom Roan, also writes regularly for our brother magazine, 10 STORY WESTERN. Be sure to get the September issue, and read Tom's next great novelette-length epic of history-making pioneers who battled for the right to outlive the Old Frontier's convulsive growing pains—DYNAMITE AND DAMNATION! On sale August 7.

All down the street dives and gambling hells, either belonged to him or were forced to split their earnings with him. No man in all the town could open a place of business without giving him a controlling interest in it.

Fowler and Bender rode on to the great hitchrack in front of the Dancing Girl to pull rein. The sheriff, his lips swollen but the blood stopped, swung lightly out of his saddle.

Bender dismounted lamely, hand still gently clamped behind him and a look of pain in his face.

Crash Fowler stopped with a jerk just three yards inside the swinging doors of the great room. His halt was so quick, so unexpected, that Walt Bender—hand still clamped gingerly behind him—was slapped by the popping swinging doors.

With a grunt the deputy stopped also, eyes widening, an utterly hopeless expression filling his face that made him look exactly like a moron.

Standing at the Bar, glass of Pink Hawley's rot-gut whiskey in his hand, the blacksnake whip coiled neatly on his shoulder, was the man they had encountered at the waterhole!

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IN SPITE of the fact that he had ridden up the valley, Buck Lee had pointed out that it was the short-cut to White Water that would save a third of the distance. The sheriff and the deputy, the boy explained, would have come back up the valley if it had not meant that they were afraid of gunfire breaking out on them.

"Ever'body hates 'em," volunteered the boy, "an' there's plenty of folks still here, even if the most have been burned out an' lots of the best fighters are locked up in jail in White Water. Crash Fowler won't come in the valley without a whole gang behind him. He knows there's plenty of lead waitin' for 'im out in the bushes."

McCrackin had brought luck to the boy. As they were riding up the valley his long whip had suddenly shot from his shoulder, and a big fat jackrabbit had come scooting forward, drawn by the swift lash from a hole in which he was hiding beside the trail.

"Meat's meat," he had told the boy as he reached down and picked up the dead rabbit. "If yuh had yoreself a shotgun an' some shells yuh could pick up quite a bit."

"We had one, once," declared the youth, "but grandpa's scattergun was burned when the house burned, Bill."

"Well," McCrackin's old face had twisted into a scowl, "maybe yo'll be gettin' another'n, somehow an' somewhere, anyhow. A kid who'll take chances like yuh to feed his grand-mammy has a right to a thing or two. I'll see what I can do. Right for the minute yuh ain't so bad off. Yo've got a fool hen an' a rabbit for supper an' breakfast."

But it could not have been much worse when they came to the charred remains of where a house had been at the west side of the valley. A white-haired old woman, almost blind and bent with rheumatism, came to the door of an evil dug-out just above the spring and peered at them.

"It's all right, Grandma!" called out the boy as he slid down from the horse. "This is Bill. He's a cowboy, but he ain't workin' for Pink Hawley an' his gang."

But the old woman was not convinced. She had retreated back into the hut as McCrackin swung off his horse. He had not argued the matter with her. There was no time for it. The boy, he had reckoned, could tell her what he wanted her to know. Right at the moment he was interested in getting on to White Water. Unloading his saddle bags to the last scrap of food in them, he had swung up again.

"Yuh behave yoreself," he had warned the boy. "Yuh ain't seen the last of me, Lizard. I'm a hard old bat to get rid of

when I drop in on a fella. I'll be back either tomorrow or next day."

"But—but yuh won't, Bill," warned the boy, "if yuh ride to White Water. They'll kill yuh. I know that gang in White Water. Stay with us! Grandma won't be so skittish when she comes to know yuh like I know yuh. Yo're all right!"

He had ridden on with the boy still protesting. The trail to White Water was a good one when he struck it. In many places old Gabriel's Trumpet—sensing a town, a good stable and oats ahead—broke into a gallop to shorten the miles until White Water loomed in the darkness in front of them.

McCrackin had been in the town only a few years before. The name of Pink Hawley had not been known in these regions then. But other men with grand ideas about themselves had been here.

Chinese in the early Montana gold-rush days had founded the town. They had lived here and worked before a band of renegade whites had driven them out to take over the property and turn it into an outlaw stronghold.

Beneath it were endless networks of old mine runways and countless shafts where hard-sweating Orientals had fought water and bad air in their patient struggle to wrest gold from the bowels of the earth.

Riding down the street, he had had no trouble in finding the public stables. And the long, lean-faced old man in charge of them had been gruff enough.

"I treat hosses right," the man had growled as he took charge of Gabriel's Trumpet, "whether they're bein' rid for Pink Hawley or not. Cash on the line, though, brother, unless yo've got the usual put-it-on-the-books ticket from Pink."

"When I carry Pink's tickets," McCrackin had snapped, "I'll come headin' this way ringin' a cowbell. Ain't nobody got a ring 'round my neck an' my tail tied in a knot in a crack."

"Yuh ain't a North Moon Valley man?" The stableman had looked him up and down in the light of a smoky lantern. "No, I see yuh ain't, though a lot of the fellas down there used to be cowboys before they married an' tried to settle down in peace."

McCrackin had tried to draw the man out, but the stableman had become suspicious. The old man did not like Pink Hawley and his crowd. A man could have sworn to that, but—like others—he was afraid to say too much.

"I try keepin' my mouth shut!" he had finally snapped. "I ain't said nothin' ag'in Pink. Ain't said nothin' ag'in anybody, mister!"

"Not much, anyhow," McCrackin had told him. "But I'll say this: I don't like neither him nor none of his mob, an' I think only a polecat woulda mammy'd the skunk. I'll tell Pink Hawley that."

"Yuh do," the stableman had warned, "an' there'll be another one of them quick funerals here. Yo'll attend it—but yuh won't come ridin' back!"

McCrackin had left him, heading up the street and knowing that his horse was in safe hands.

He stopped at a little restaurant. An old man and an old woman waited on him.

"A steak," the man told him, "with 'taters an' coffee'll be a dollar fifty. No, don't get mad!" the man had pleaded. "Cheap as beef is, I figure no meal like that is worth more'n fifty cents in this country, but there's what's called a tax on things in this town. Pink Hawley gets a dollar on such meals."

"An' yuh pay it?"

"I pay it!" affirmed the man. "Me an' my ol' woman don't want folks comin' in here an' shootin' up the place an' bustin' ever'thing in the house. Some who've tried to buck Pink have been dragged outa town on the end of a rope an' told not to come back. His gang won't stand for monkey business. No, sir! Anybody in town will tell yuh that, pardner."

"Yeh, I guess so." McCrackin had had his meal, and then drifted on up the street. A man did not have to hang around all night if he wanted to see what Pink Hawley looked like.

He had been in the Dancing Girl less than five minutes before the sheriff and the deputy came in. He heard the doors *slap-slap,* and caught a glimpse of the entering men out of the corners of his eyes.

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PINK HAWLEY was behind the bar. At first Hawley had been standing at the lower end and McCrackin had been studying the man's big egg-bald head and his huge frame.

Hawley, dressed in spotless white starched as stiff as boards, had not noticed him. He had been talking in a guarded voice to three evil-looking gun-louts hanging over the lower end of the bar, but as the sheriff and his deputy came in Hawley turned and came forward. As he started to pass without even noticing him, McCrackin suddenly thrust forward his right hand.

"Hello, there, Pete!" He called out the name so that every man in the huge room could hear it. "Peter Jackson, by gosh! When did yuh leave the Panhandle Country?"

"My name's *not* Jackson!"

Hawley had stopped as if some one had pricked him with a knife, and his voice was as sharp as a mean dog's bark. For a moment his eyes bored straight into McCrackin's face. McCrackin met the stare unflinchingly.

For five seconds after that it looked as if each man was trying to stare the other down. All the pinkness had left the larger man's face to give place to a sickly gray pallor. His lips drew back, thin and hard like a snarl of a wolf about to bare his fighting fangs.

McCrackin was the next to speak: "We know each other, all right, Pete," he growled. "Let's not act like we don't."

As McCrackin growled his left hand came up as swiftly as a scooting big lizard. The larger man's eyes widened when he looked down into the big round muzzle of a cocked Colt in that hand.

"What in hell are yuh up to?" snarled the gambler, catching his breath sharply, his voice a startled hiss. "What—what's the damned fool idea of that gun?"

"Stand purty!" McCrackin's voice was level, but there was a wicked little grin on his face. "That gun aims to shoot if yuh ain't damn careful. Yuh know me, I know yuh. When I walk into a wolf's den, I pick the pack king lobo 'imself. This place is loaded with all kinds of two-legged dynamite. I can see two fellas in that lookin' glass behind yuh right now. They aim to maybe poke a gun in my back or try whammin' me down acrost the head.

"If yo're still in yore right mind, purty boy, yo'd better tell 'em to lay of me. If they hit me or gouge me, then I'll pull my trigger. Yuh won't like that worth a plugged nickel. Yuh have a right smart-lookin' dump here, Pete, an' yo've shorely got hawg-sense. It'd be kinda messy to have yore brains splattered all over the beer taps an' yore shiny bar."

"Steady, boys—*steady!*" The gambler's voice was a sharp whisper as he slowly lifted his hands. "This old devil's got the gun-drop on me. Keep back, or he'll shoot—damn 'im!"

CHAPTER THREE

Bound for Hell on a Shutter!

BULLWHIP BILL McCRACKIN—of all men! Sure, Pink Hawley knew him! For a second right at the beginning he had not been sure, because eight or ten years had been a long time. Men changed, and yet Bill Mc-

Crackin looked now as if he still wore the same old sloppy clothing, perpetually run-over boots, battered bullhide chaps, and the same shapeless old hat plopped on his head.

McCrackin was smiling out of one side of his mouth while the opposite side was twisted into an ugly little leer. His eyes were bright, the right one larger than the left, and set like a hard orb of glass in its socket, while the left one seemed to be laughing in its depths with impish mischievousness.

The sixgun in his hand was lying there on the bar, big hammer cocked, a rope-scarred forefinger coiled around the trigger. One slight pull of that finger and the great room would jump full of noise.

Hawley licked his lips dryly. "Don't prod 'im in to killing me boys," he ordered. "He'll do it, even if he knows you'll drop him dead at the roar of his gun. I know how to handle him. Leave this old buzzard to me!"

"Sure," nodded McCrackin, "an' we'll get along fine. Me an' this dude's old friends—if yuh don't care how yuh say that last word. An' his feet, as yuh can see, can be held to the fire. He don't like the name I called 'im. Brings back things, maybe.

"Where I knowed 'im years ago he was the same kind of a hawg as he is now. His jowels wasn't so big, but he was all hawg. A rope come mighty nigh gettin' 'im, like it's gonna get 'im here 'fore it's done. Some varmits run a long time before a rope or a bullet cuts 'em down.

"Yuh birds don't like that, I know." He was watching the startled and speechless crowd behind him by glancing from time to time into the big mirror on the back bar. "If somethin' happens to this hawg, then it happens to yuh. Yuh know what I mean. Yo're all a gang of dirty cut-throats, an' 'cause I've got the gun-drop on yore head hawg yore guts have gone to water. Tell yore swill-sloppers to back away from the bar, Pete. Me an' yuh aim to take a walk."

Hawley glanced at the amazed gunmen leaning against the bar. He nodded his head and scowled. The most of them lifted their hands as they moved, backing away. It left the handrail clear all the way to the foot of the bar.

At a nod from McCrackin, Hawley started moving, keeping his hands up. McCrackin followed him, left hand sliding along the rail and the bar so that the old .45's muzzle would keep the renegade town boss covered.

"We'll talk, McCrackin." Hawley's voice was hoarse, and he was speaking half to McCrackin and half to other certain men in the crowd. "I've got a room where we can be alone. Don't anybody try to follows us!"

"That's right, Pinky Puss." McCrackin grinned, and now planted the muzzle of the cocked Colt firmly against the big man's spine as he moved out from behind the lower end of the bar. "Our talk's betwix just us two, but this bunch might know now that it concerns North Moon Valley an' yore low-down rattlesnake grip on White Water as well. Lead on, kindly light!"

Hawley moved like a sleepwalker. Women were now staring at them in the rear part of the big room. A tall, golden-haired creature started to move toward them.

Pink Hawley scowled her away, and marched steadily on. They came to a stout door in the southwest corner of the room. Hawley carefully lowered his left hand and pushed open the door.

A lamp burned on one side of a big desk ahead of them. It was an enormous lamp, having a squat, five-gallon glass jug filled with oil for a base. McCrackin eyed it curiously, and kicked the door closed with his heel as they stepped into a small room with the blinds carefully drawn over the windows.

HAWLEY stopped, hands still up. McCrackin felt behind him, and threw a heavy bolt on the door.

"Better search me, McCrackin," ordered the gambler. "Go ahead! I want to relax so I can talk. I'm not carrying a gun, and my hands are getting tired."

"No tricks, Pete." McCrackin ran his hands over him, then stepped behind the desk to open the drawers and look for weapons there. Dropping to one knee he looked up under the desk.

"No," Hawley smiled thinly, "there's no sawed-off shotgun lurking under that desk, McCrackin."

"Yo've changed some, maybe." McCrackin grinned as he stood erect. "In the Panhandle Country yuh used to keep one handy, an' all yuh had to do was to ease yore hand to the trigger to blow a man to hell as he sat in front of yore desk. I reckon," he slowly looked around at the walls of the room, "yuh can set down."

"Thanks, McCrackin." It was the great cat playing with the mouse now. Hawley moved behind the desk. He hunched his chair close to it and planted his forearms well forward in front of him and clasped his hands so that they would be in full sight. A man had to be damned careful when he started to ease Bullwhip Bill McCrackin into a trap. "Help yourself to a chair. Maybe we can come to terms."

"That's only talk, Pete." McCrackin seated himself on the corner of the desk across from Hawley's left, and lowered the hammer of his Colt to half-cock as he sat there toying with it.

"I stand for one thing, yuh for another. We're both what yuh might call lawless. I don't believe in takin' folks to law. There's too much lice just like yuh runnin' it. Yuh don't believe in it either, unless yuh buy the law over on yore side, like yuh did for six years in the Panhandle Country.

"An' don't say yo've ree-formed." He glanced at Hawley with a wicked little grin. "Yuh ain't. Damn' if I don't think yo've grown worse—an' nobody thought that was possible. Yo're fightin' wimmin an' kids now. Yuh fought 'em in the Panhandle Country in yore way, but yuh didn't burn 'em outa house an' home at night—an' fill 'em full of lead as they was tryin' to run out from yore blood-hungry gunmen."

"We don't need to go in the past, McCrackin!"

"Hurts, don't it?" McCrackin pushed back his hat to scratch his head. "Can't forget hang-ropes waitin' for yuh, huh? Well, let yore pulse slow down. Them Panhandle country ropes ain't goin' to get yuh, Pinky Puss. People in this country have a more recent claim on yore neck an' hide.

"Yuh ain't givin' up without a fight, I know that, but me an' yuh are together now. We aim to stay that way until some things are settled. How would yuh like to take a little ride down into North Moon Valley with me an' talk it over with the folks there?"

"You can't make me do that, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin!" Hawley arose, eyes wide and wild with alarm at the thought. "They'd shoot me on sight! You may have speared me out there in the barroom on your gun, but—but—"

" 'But'—*what?*" McCrackin slid off the desk and stepped back to a big, stout chair sitting squarely in front of it. Hawley watched him slowly holster his .45 and tried to keep the gleam of eagerness out of his eyes. "Yuh think they'd hang yuh in the valley, of course. Yuh—"

"Sit—sit down, and I'll tell you why." Hawley's voice was a whisper of tenseness as he eased back in his chair, hands clasped in front of him again. His heart was hammering and pattering like a drum. "We can at least talk!"

His right foot was moving cautiously, feeling over the stout planking of the floor under the desk. "No man beats me out,

McCrackin. *No* man, I tell you!" His voice was lifting into a bark. "I'm taking over this country, and I'm making no fool mistakes like I did in the Panhandle Country. It took a mob down there to run me out. No lone-handed fool like you did it, even if you did help!"

"That's purty." McCrackin slowly seated himself in the chair. "I like to make yuh mad, Pete. It generally helps a lot in the long run, 'cause the truth sometimes comes floppin' out."

"Like some people," sneered the gambler, "who get to thinking they're so damned smart! Right about that time they start flopping, and that's you tonight, Bill McCrackin. Remember that word, as long as you *can* remember it. Most people don't remember long, after I get them where I want 'em. You're hell-bound right now and don't know it, you fool!"

McCrackin heard something crack under his chair. He tried to spring to his feet, but he was too late. The chair was flopping backward, the floor beneath it opening, dropping.

As he went backward he saw the man at the desk crouch, saw the wild gleam in his eyes. Then the man, the room and all was gone as cold black air seemed to rush up around him in an enveloping cloud of dampness. . . .

★

NEVER had Pink Hawley, alias Peter Jackson, ever sent a man to hell so quickly. He sat there staring, watching the section of the floor swing gently back in place. The chair was gone with its victim, falling through black space to the floor of one of the many old mine shafts under the town.

Two hundred feet down, and man and chair would come to a smashing halt on the rough wet rocks of the bottom of the shaft. Only five men in White Water knew that deadly trap was there—five of the most trusted men Pink Hawley had ever gathered around him.

Shaking now with fear as the aftermath of his trickery, he arose and hastily crossed the room. Every nerve in his body seemed to be trembling and jerking as he raked back the thick drapes and pushed his sickly yellow face to the panes of glass in the window.

A glance outside showed him that the slope behind the Dancing Girl was dark and bare. A man leaping out that window and running away could be gone in the darkness before another man could open the door and get back to the barroom.

It was just what he wanted. Swinging the drapes completely aside and ripping one of them half-down, he thrust the window wide open.

Wheeling, heart still pumping violently with excitement, his face a mask of fear and fury, he started scurrying back to the desk. Just as he reached it, a hoarse bellow of terror came from him and he was throwing himself forward, snatching blindly for the corner of the desk to save himself from almost certain doom.

A trap of his own making had started to yawn for him. It was that damned trick door in the floor. It had swung up, but one of the spring locks to hold it there had failed to latch. The door had started down with him. Only by the quickest and the most violent lunge had he saved himself from plunging into the shaft.

But it was only the beginning of his ill fortune. He had seized the desk with both hands. His weight had given it a fierce jerk. The enormous lamp on the other end of it wobbled. Pulling himself up in a wild scrambling, he tried to catch the lamp as he bounded on to solid flooring, but he was not quick enough.

His lunge only shook the desk again and the big lamp teetered, turned half-around, and went crashing to the floor, its tall chimney shattering and the glass jug breaking in a dozen pieces to send

the spilling oil spreading in all directions.

Straight grain alcohol would not have ignited any quicker. There was a puff from the lighted wick lying there in the wreckage, and the flames came rolling up, running over the floor and licking along the varnished sides of the desk, hungry to reach its top.

A man had to get out of here, and he had to be damned quick about it! With the bottoms of his trouserlegs smoking, Hawley bounded on to the door.

The bolt stuck for an instant where the uncaring McCrackin had jammed it home. Hawley was cursing and snarling like a madman in a trap of his own making when the bolt slid back and he threw the door open.

Screams of terror filled the enormous room in front of him now. Women were up, scrambling back. The flames behind Hawley seemed to fill the little room all the way to the ceiling. Men saw what was happening, and a wild burst of yells roared all over the big room.

"Robbed me and jumped out the window!" Hawley was gasping for air, but his mind had never been keener, his thoughts quicker. "Took me back there and robbed me! Then broke that big lamp on the desk and set the Dancing Girl afire! Water, damn it! Get it fast! Don't stand there looking at me like scared apes! Water! *Water!* Everybody get to work!"

A mob turned and tore out the front door. Yells of "Fire!" "Fire!" filled the head of the street. In a matter of seconds the whole town seemed to be thundering with excitement. A combined bucket-and-hat brigade was formed. Those who could not find pails brought the water in their hats. They formed two wide-eyed, hurry-scurrying streams of humanity pouring in and out of the Dancing Girl, the water itself coming in a stream.

From the first it looked as if the Dancing Girl was doomed to certain destruction. An oil fire was a hard one to fight. The heat was terrific. Men could go only to the door of the room and blindly fling the water forward.

"Tackle it from the outside, too!" bawled Hawley. "Don't depend on one line! Break out the windows that are not open. If the Dancing Girl goes, the whole town will go with it! Fight to save your homes!"

"Fire!" "Fire!" bellowed voices outside, and a roar of shots shook the night as if to call people from their beds. "Get water goin' to the back end of the buildin'!"

More people were coming.

"He let it slip that the North Moon Valley people'd hired him to do this!" Even with the fire raging and threatening to burn his place down, Pink Hawley could not help using a little mob psychology. This was really the place for it. Everybody was scared and half-mad, and they could be made to believe anything.

"He told me that the North Moon Valley people hired him to set my place afire and burn out the whole town!"

"Yo're a no-good, doggoned dirty liar, Mr. Pink Hawley!"

The voice, screaming with anger, might have been a pistol shot. It staggered the bucket brigade, making men pause to look at the speaker.

"How did that thing get in here?" Hawley's voice now filled the place with rage. "That's that damned Lee brat! Who let you in here, you little fool?"

"I let myself in!" cried the boy. "An' —an' I know who you're talkin' about. Yo're talkin' about Bill, the bullwhip fella. But Bill's all right. I followed 'im in on grandpa's ol' one-eyed red mare. I knowed yuh folks would try to kill Bill."

"Get him out of here!" snarled Hawley as he caught Sheriff Crash Fowler's eye. "Throw the little brat in jail!"

"I ain't goin' to jail!" cried the boy. "I'm stickin' here to help Bill, 'cause Bill helped me. Stand back an' don't come

a-crowdin' me. I'll shoot! Don't yuh think I ain't got shells now, Crash Fowler. I took some out of the back of Bill's belt when he was ridin' me up the valley on his hoss! Gimme room, I say!"

Gripped in both hands was the old Colt the boy had been carrying since his grandfather had been killed in the valley. He had crowded back against the wall, the big weapon cocked.

His eyes were wide with fright, and it was the kind of fright that would make a scared little brat like that shoot without even thinking of what he was doing.

"I want Bill!" The kid was crying now. "I want Bill, tell yuh! I told 'im yuh mean ol' devils would do somethin' to him. Bill's all right. He treats a man right!"

It took the sheriff and Walt Bender to bring him down. Fowler got in front of him in a crouch as if about to charge him. Bender was twenty feet along the wall to the youth's left. The deputy eased a six-shooter out of his holster. Suddenly he sent it flying through the air. It struck the boy on the shoulder.

The old Colt roared in his hands, sending a bullet smashing into the ceiling. As he went down, half-paralyzed by the blow, and his old weapon flying out of his hands, Crash Fowler plunged forward to kick him in the stomach and slam a booted foot down on his neck. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

When Gun-Devils Stalk

DEAD, swimming eyes in a fog, and feeling as if he was slowly being cut through the middle with a dull handsaw, Bill McCrackin came back to consciousness. For the moment he did not remember where the devil he was or what had happened to him.

It was mighty uncomfortable; he realized that at once, but very little more than that for the first half-minute. Then he wiggled his feet and felt behind him, to discover that he was hanging on a rough-timbered wall like an Indian papoose hung to the side of a hut to keep it out of devilment.

A dripping and dancing little streak of light appeared in front of him when the fog cleared from his eyes. It was danged funny looking light, long, quivering and jerking at one moment, short and threatening to go out completely at the next moment. Looked like bright sunshine trying to make up its mind whether or not to wedge its way through a ragged crack. He blinked, scowled and licked his dry lips, and then discovered that the streak was fire trying to run down a wall.

There was more fire above him and a lot of hollering going on. He listened to that noise for a few moments before it all came back to him.

He was down in a hole, a big, square shaft, and there was hell to pay above him. Hot oil was dripping through a crack up there. As a slow stream of it again brightened as it blazed down in front of him he could see the timbered walls around him.

A damp wind, foul with evil odors, came up and struck him like a sickening cloud. Something was dead or had been dead down there in that damp blackness below him—and a strong deodorant of some kind was trying to kill the smell.

Once more in his hectic life the devil had taken care of his own, he reckoned. His old gunbelts had saved him here. After falling a dozen feet in a plunge with his back to a wall, the flapping belts had caught on the big, square head of a rusty iron bolt in the timbers lining the wall of an old mine shaft. The belts—the very things that had saved his life—were making that sawing sensation and shutting off his breath, as if trying to get even with him for placing such a strain on them.

He felt carefully behind him. His left

hand found a rough two-by-four with a bar across it to serve as a rung of a wall ladder that was an almost inevitable part of any mine shaft.

He turned his head and looked at it. By the light from the burning oil he saw that some of the ladder had been torn away, leaving the remains to go disappearing into the darkness below.

The job at the moment was to get himself off that bolt. It had banged his head against the wall, the blow knocking him out when the bolt caught him.

Rusty old iron was dangerous. It might snap off at any second, and if it did a man would not know where he would land. There would be only one thing certain about it. It would not be in a good place for any man to land if Pete Jackson had anything to do with it!

Grunting and pulling, he was finally on the ladder. What was left of it was rickety, liable to let go at any instant. The bullwhip was still around his shoulder; he could feel it there as he started up, holding his breath.

It was as hot as the devil above him, and getting hotter all the time. Holes were taking shape in the floor where the fire was beginning to burn through the planks. He could hear water splashing, men cursing and running.

Something had happened that Pete Jackson did not want to happen. No matter how mad Pete got, he would not try to burn his whole infernal dump down!

Perspiration was pouring out of him when he reached the top of the shaft. The burning floor was no more than two feet above his head. Near-scalding water showered him, and blazing bits of wood and hot sparks fell on him as he swung to his right, hunting cooler air. A man was going to have a devil of a time getting out of this place, with a house as big as the Dancing Girl burning down over his head!

The Dancing Girl sat on a solid foundation of stone three feet thick and with only a narrow crack left here and there in the rocks for air to circulate beneath it. He could soon see that none of the cracks were wider than the thickness of a man's hand.

A rabbit penned up under here would not be able to get out, unless somebody helped him, and that would not do at all. If one started hammering on the floor with a gun-butt, it would mean only that planks would have to be pried up—and then he would be dragged out, smelling the business-end of somebody's smoking sixgun.

That thought kept him scared until he finally saw another glow of light ahead of him. As he crawled toward it he discovered that it was coming from a lantern hanging in a cellar.

Dust covering him, the smoke settling beneath the floor now a suffocating cloud, he slid on to the rock-walled rim of a great vault cut in the ground, and a wide grin suddenly streaked itself across his face.

Below him, to be reached by men above from a stairway leading up to a trap door in the floor behind the bar, was the Dancing Girl's enormous, well-stocked liquor cellar!

Whiskey, wine and brandy barrels, lying tier on tier, lined the walls hewn from solid rock. Long and tall bottle racks and jug racks were at every hand. McCrackin slid down the tiers of barrels just below him. The smile on his face widened until the lantern light made him look like a grinning 'possum.

"Champagne—an' just what the doctor ordered!" he chuckled, rubbing dust from his eyes and staring at a long, high bottle rack. "Now, by golly, Mr. Willyam McCrackin, I know yo're in sassiety!"

He reached for a bottle, and as his hand closed on it his eyes widened. He stepped back, bottle in his hand, body tensed. For he was not alone in this big cellar!

OUT of the array of shadows a figure was taking shape, long yellow and moving with a low, slinking stride that brought it forward, belly close to the rock floor, its ears two flattened little cruel wings against the side of its head, its long fangs baring in the lantern light.

A man was a fool who let himself think that Pink Hawley would have only one nasty little trick up his sleeve. Hawley, alias Peter Jackson, had never been known to stop with just one thing.

Suddenly McCrackin remembered that he had heard a rumor, somewhere down below the Wyoming line, that this Hawley kept an enormous Rocky Mountain cougar in his cellar as a guard over his stocks of liquors.

Hawley, himself, had to come down firing blank cartridges from a .45 in each hand to drive back and cage the ferocious beast once a day when wet goods were being taken upstairs by his bartenders and flunkies for his long bar and the many tables.

Peter Jackson had always had a flair for wild animals and reptiles. In the Panhandle Country he had kept pits of Texas rattlesnakes, a few gila monsters from Arizona, and a pool of alligators and several cages of wildcats from the lower swamplands of the South. They had been his attractions to draw the trade and make many yokels look upon him with a feeling of awe.

The thing moving forward now was as mean as they came. It slunk without a sound, eyes two great balls of round yellow fire in the light from the smoky lantern, an easy, swinging rhythm in its walk.

It was too wise to hurry just yet. A dozen feet away it stopped, crouching lower, the claws of its softly padded feet spreading and gripping the uneven rocks of the floor while its long tail lashed quietly. Every fighting fang was bared, every muscle tensed for a lightning spring that would tear its victim off the floor and send him smashing backward on the rocks, while the long teeth drove home for the death-stroke.

McCrackin hurled a bottle of champagne at the thing, and then leaped back into the shallow dark space between the ends of a pair of the long bottle racks. The bottle broke right in front of the cougar's nose, the expensive champagne splattering the huge cat's face. The shiny golden eyes blinked as the cat leaped back, its snarl twisting into a growl now that seemed to shake the cellar.

Backing on, a six-shooter slipping into his left hand, McCrackin's right hand felt upward for the whip around his shoulder. That whip could be deadly if he could get it into action and make one clean, desperate stroke. And the fifty-one No. One buckshot in its round, hard-braided butt would knock a horse down or flatten a man into unconsciousness as if he had been mauled with a blackjack.

He did not want to shoot. That would be the worst thing he could do here. There was still a lot of noise going on about him, and he could hear the fire crackling and the water slopping back there over the old shaft, but the sudden roar of a shot down here would be an absolute give-away.

The owner of the Dancing Girl would be certain to rush down the stairs to investigate, and soon every gunman in White Water would be trying to fall on his neck or open fire on him from the head of the stairs.

Backing on, he tried to reach the foot of the stairway with some thought of slowly working his way up to the trap door overhead, and keeping the cat at bay at the same time. He had one of the long bottle racks between him and the cougar now, and the cougar was taking its time, as if waiting for something.

It growled again, the sound enough to tingle a man's nerves from the top of his head to the ends of his toes. There was

something about that growl that was like a warning—like a low, guarded call.

McCrackin had faced death countless times in his hectic life, and now crouched waiting for the inevitable. The great cat was easing forward, moving as noiselessly as a splotch of dirty-yellow oil slowly gliding over the uneven floor.

It stopped, crouching again in the two-foot opening between the bottle racks where McCrackin slipped through. It stood there, claws working, feeling the rocks, getting set.

Right hand ready with the whip, McCrackin suddenly warped it forward, bent on either a skull-crushing or a complete knockout blow. The whip itself was lightning, but the cougar was quicker.

It darted back, the strange, calling growl now appearing to vibrate the very floor of the cellar. And now another growl answered!

At first McCrackin thought that it was only a reverberating sound from the great cat in front of him, but it came from his left, where the shadows hid a bend in the cellar beyond the foot of the stairs.

One quick glance showed McCrackin the second cat. It was slightly smaller than the first, and he guessed that it was a male that had been asleep somewhere back there in the darkness.

It stopped, every muscle stiffening, bristles along its back rising, its fangs baring in the light and shadows.

A man was going to have to start some straight, deadly fast shooting pretty soon if he ever expected to get out of Pink Hawley's booze-cellar alive!

CHAPTER FIVE

A Hell-Town Goes Mad!

BETWEEN the fire and that infernal little Buck Lee, Pink Hawley did not know what was going to happen next. The boy was a fool, and Crash Fowler and Walt Bender were soon showing themselves to be no better.

Bender recovered the Colt he had thrown to knock the boy down. There were men in the Dancing Girl who did not like to see any kid treated like that, and the sheriff and his slow-witted deputy were making it worse.

Crash Fowler dragged the boy to his feet and started ramming his head back against the wall as if trying to pummel it into bloody pulp against the planking. The kid suddenly struck out like a swinging gate. His small fist drove straight to the pit of Fowler's stomach, and with a grunt that could be heard all over the room the sheriff staggered back, gasping for breath.

"You little devil!" he snarled. "I'll show you how to hit the law!"

For the looks of things Hawley would have stopped it if he had been close enough. Not that he cared what happened to that brat! But the place to beat up a kid like that was outside somewhere in the dark, where no one would see the beating.

Hurt just a little, the sheriff was still a fool. He stepped in, and drove a smashing right fist to the boy's face. Buck Lee went down, the blood flying from his nose and mouth. A bellow came almost at the same time from a big old wolf hunter who had come to White Water for a little drinking spree among the women.

"That's a hell of a way to treat a kid!" bawled the man, moving forward with his fists clenched. "Roll up yore sleeves, law-fella, an' try yourself a crack at a man!"

Hawley tried to yell a warning as he saw Walt Bender swinging into it behind the wolf hunter. Bender was always quick to slap a man over the head with a six-shooter. Sometimes his quick strokes cracked a skull. He struck now, and it was a furious blow.

The wolf hunter went down, the blood

flying from his opened scalp, his long, big-shouldered figure scooting forward on the floor to go slamming up against the wall as if he had been shot through the head.

"Folks can't monkey with the law." The deputy wheeled, leering at the amazed lines of the bucket brigade. "They've got to stand by the law, 'cause the law's right every time. If anybody's got anything to say—"

"Keep your damned mouth shut!" cried Hawley, springing forward. "I'm tired of your banging people over the head, Walt!"

"An' so's a lot of others, by grab!" cried a brawny blacksmith. "If there was a speck of manhood in either him or that dressed up monkey of a sheriff they wouldn't be hittin' folks!"

"Shut up, Link!" Two friends of the blacksmith caught him, throwing him back in the line. "Yuh can't buck Crash Fowler. Keep that water goin' to the fire, boys! We've got places an' homes in this town. Move into it!"

"And you two yaps get that brat out of here!" snarled Hawley to the sheriff and his deputy. "Take him on down to the jail and lock him up! Good God, do you want to play around like a pair of damned fools until you watch the place burn down?"

They were beating the fire at last. He saw that when—with half the crowd snarling—he watched Fowler drag Buck Lee away. Aided by three others of the well-known gun-crowd in White Water, Walt Bender was carrying the yet-limp old wolf hunter out. If his skull was crushed and he died in jail it would be better to have him down there and out of sight than to sprawl here and die on the floor.

Somebody outside had finally got some sense in his head. A wagon filled with empty barrels had been run up to the artesian spring with a gang of men pulling it. With the barrels hastily filled, the wagon was run down through a narrow alleyway, and now real water was being poured into the little room to send the clouds of steam boiling.

The fire was licked with everybody in the house except Hawley and the women fighting it, when the gambler got another shock that left him speechless for a moment. There was no one behind the bar, and had not been since the fire started. A burly red-beard pointed to it now with a yell. Hawley whirled, and saw steam and smoke rising back there in huge, puffing clouds.

It was only the smoke and steam, driven back under the floor, that was escaping, but Hawley did not know that as he turned to the bar. He took two quick jumps toward it, and then stopped. The great room of the Dancing Girl was suddenly filled with terrified yells and the crash of tables and chairs. Men and women poured back against the walls or fought like scared wild animals with each other to get behind something that would hide them.

Hell was coming! At least it looked like hell. Out of the smoke and steam rising from behind the bar emerged a huge yellow shape. There was a squall, loud and fearsome enough to make one's eyes pop in their sockets and his hair stand on end. The shape shot up and over the bar. It sprang to a halt in front of the bar, tail lashing, another terrifying squall coming from it.

And now a second shape was coming, slightly smaller than the first. Squalling like the first one, it came over the bar, landing beside the one on the floor. Instinctively, Pink Hawley clutched at his hip for a gun, forgetting that he was unarmed. They were his cats, his much-talked-about cougars.

The thought of how they had escaped had not come to him. He saw himself now as only a man without a gun, and he knew that each of those great cats hated him as only cats could hate.

"Clear—clear the way to the door!" hooted the voice of a man crouching behind an overturned table against the wall. "They'll run quicker'n they'll fight if they have the chance!"

For a split second the female cougar looked as if she was going to charge Hawley, then she wheeled. The front doors were open, but the great cat did not go toward them. She shot toward the rear of the room with the male behind her. There was a crash of glass, then another, and as quickly as they had come both cats were gone, racing away for the safety of the darkness outside.

Hawley whirled now, back behind the bar. There was still steam and dead smoke boiling up, but he could see that the trap door in the floor had been thrown back. He slammed it down, and then a grunt of terror came from him as he flung up his hands.

"Don't—don't shoot me!" he gasped.

Squatting there behind the bar, the smoke and steam lifting, was Bullwhip Bill McCrackin looking at him with a wicked little grin over the long barrel of a cocked .45!

McCRACKIN came forward in a crouch. "Swing around so that I can fit the muzzle of this gun right in yore kidneys. For a little while them cats of yores had me so scared my ears flapped. Then I found out that they was afraid when yuh jabbed a gun at 'em like yuh meant business—thanks to yore blank cartridge shootin'. It held 'em back—my gun-wigglin', I mean—until I could ease up the steps an' swing in the clear.

"An' lis'en, the rest of yuh knot-headed sheep!" His voice lifted into a bull-bellowing over the room. "This Peter Jackson fella ain't goin' to tell yuh to shoot me when he knows I've got a gun in his back an' will pull my trigger as I go down!

"Some of yuh ease back an' take a smell at that room what was afire. There's a mine shaft under it. This snake drops men in it by a trap door. There's dead men down there. He's poured down stuff to stop the smell, but it ain't done it!"

But no one in the room needed to go that far. The heat of the fire was making the old shaft give up its secrets.

"Get goin', handsome!" McCrackin bored the muzzle of his six-shooter hard against his victim's back. "I said me an' yuh was goin' places."

A woman started to rush to them. A man caught her and whirled her back. Gunmen were like wolves then following them out the door. It looked like they were going to close in a number of times. Pink Hawley cursed them.

"Don't crowd him!" he kept crying. "Don't crowd the old fool! He'll kill me!"

He was still crying and snarling when they reached the jail down the street where a milling mob stood in front of it. Shifting his six-shooter to his left hand, McCrackin ordered his prisoner to halt.

Crash Fowler and Walt Bender were coming out of the jail and off the short porch in front of it.

McCrackin was ready for them. The old peso he always carried with a slot cut in the center of it had been slipped on the end of his rawhide lash.

Suddenly the wicked whip shot forward. There was a resounding *plop* as the peso struck. With the whip coming out of the darkness Sheriff Crash Fowler could not see it. The peso struck him on the temple. As a moving man would stumble and drop dead, he went down, sprawling forward on his face.

Walt Bender tried to wheel back, but the whip was quicker. The peso drove forward. There was another *plop,* and this time it sounded hollow, but the deputy reeled backward, coming down with a crash on the porch.

"Waltz along, Pete!" McCrackin gouged the man in the back again. "There's business for us both inside."

It took only a minute for them to find the keys. Never had he seen a jail so packed full of men. They stood in the cells and corridors like sardines in a box. As McCrackin made his prisoner open the door a half-scream of joy came to him.

"Bill!" cried Buck Lee. "Bill! *Bill!* That's him, men! That's the bullwhip man!"

"What're yuh doin' here, Lizard?" scowled McCrackin. "Thought I told yuh to stay home an' behave yoreself. Now, dang yore little hide, maybe yuh ain't goin' to get no scattergun."

Men were pouring into the room now. They were a snarling lot, looking for a moment as if they would as soon attack McCrackin as not, but Buck Lee was talking to them in a shrill voice.

"Help yoreself to guns!" ordered McCrackin. "Blow out that light on the desk, Lizard! No, *no,* damn it!" He drove a big North Moon Valley man back with a blow of his fist. "Keep yore hands off Pinky Hawley. We need Pinky. He's got several things to do before this night's done."

It looked like it was going off without a single hitch now. Well-armed men, prisoners actually hungry for a breath of fresh air only a few minutes before, started pouring out of the jail. Sheriff Fowler and Walt Bender were scooped up off the ground and locked up in their own jail, and the mob moved on.

A spasmodic outbreak of cheering started the fight in the street as McCrackin was driving his prisoner on through the front door of the Dancing Girl. Pink Hawley had too many gunmen in this town to allow people to make fools out of them by jeering. A .45 barked, then another, a third, and then a racing, ripping sound of them.

It was what those well-armed North Moon Valley men wanted. Having been picked up a few at a time by so-called possemen invading the valley or catching them in town, they had never had a chance to really fight. Now they did.

Each was sparring for this very thing. At the first roar of the .45 they were like wildcats darting for shelter to open up with rousing bursts of gun-thunder.

"What—what are you going to do, Bill McCrackin?" cried Hawley. "Damn it, I know you've got the upper hand now. I—I won't make any more trouble in the

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valley. I—I'll forgive, an' so can they forgive! I'll run every gunman out of town!"

"Yuh won't need to do that!" barked a big, red-headed man. "The boys outside are goin' to do that with a rope, yuh red-headed buzzard!"

"Ain't nobody goin' to hurt Pinky Puss!" McCrackin hurled the red-beard back. "Yuh dudes are goin' to take good care of Pinky. Yes, sir! Now, Pinky Puss, I see that big safe of yores at the head of the bar. Open 'er up!"

"What—what are you going to do, McCrackin?"

"Take yore money. I've heard that safe's jammed full."

"You can't do that. It's robbery!"

"Of course!" McCrackin seemed to jar the room with a laugh. "That's the way you got it, an' I'm only goin' to hand it back to the folks in North Moon Valley. Get to that safe! Keep hands off, yuh!" He gave the red-beard another push. "I'll drop yuh with the butt of this whip, if yuh don't!"

PINK HAWLEY sobbed like a woman when he opened the safe. Tears poured unheeded down his face when he started stacking money on the bar. He could hear the shots outside, still thundering as if from one end of the town to the other. All White Water was turning on him.

He heard horses running. It was the old story. Now that the king wolf of the pack was in a trap, all the rest of the wolves that saw their chance were running away. No gunman was going to stick around to have his neck stretched!"

"Of course I was cleaning them out!" wailed Hawley when the safe was empty. "Take the damned money and let me go. Divide it among them. "I—I'll turn over everything I've got."

McCrackin looked at him narrowly. "Well, that's mighty white of yuh, Pete. I'm told they had a right nice little red schoolhouse in the valley—"

"There's money enough there to build a dozen damned schoolhouses!"

"Not the kind I aim to see built back, Pete." McCrackin's eyes were mean and narrow. "It's got to be bigger'n a little red one. We're goin' to maybe name it after yuh, Pete. Goin' to maybe call it the Peter Jackson School. A man oughta do somethin' good in his life."

"You—you're about to pull something, McCrackin!" half-screamed Hawley.

"Yeah, that's right," nodded McCrackin grimly. "Yuh ain't no good, dead or alive, but yuh're better alive for my purpose. Yo're goin' back to the Panhandle Country, Pete. A sheriff'll come an' get yuh. There's ten thousand dollars reward on yore head. It'll build a mighty fine schoolhouse here!"

"Catch 'im!" bellowed a voice.

Hawley had suddenly wheeled. He loped down the bar, hands grasping for six-shooters always hidden under the drain trough.

McCrackin's whip lashed out, and Hawley went down with men piling over the bar and atop of him.

Outside, the shooting was dying away. McCrackin turned to the back bar. Among the many ornaments hanging there he had seen a small, double-barreled shotgun of an excellent London make. He took it down, and handed it across the bar to Buck Lee.

"With," he grinned, "what yuh might call the compliments of Mr. Hawley, Lizard. Take it an' don't start shootin' up the town. We'll get shells for it at the hardware store."

Then he turned, looked at the crowd. "Now, who's got them jail keys, so that Mister Pink Hawley Peter Jackson can have a nice rest, while he's waitin' for the Panhandle law to get him?"

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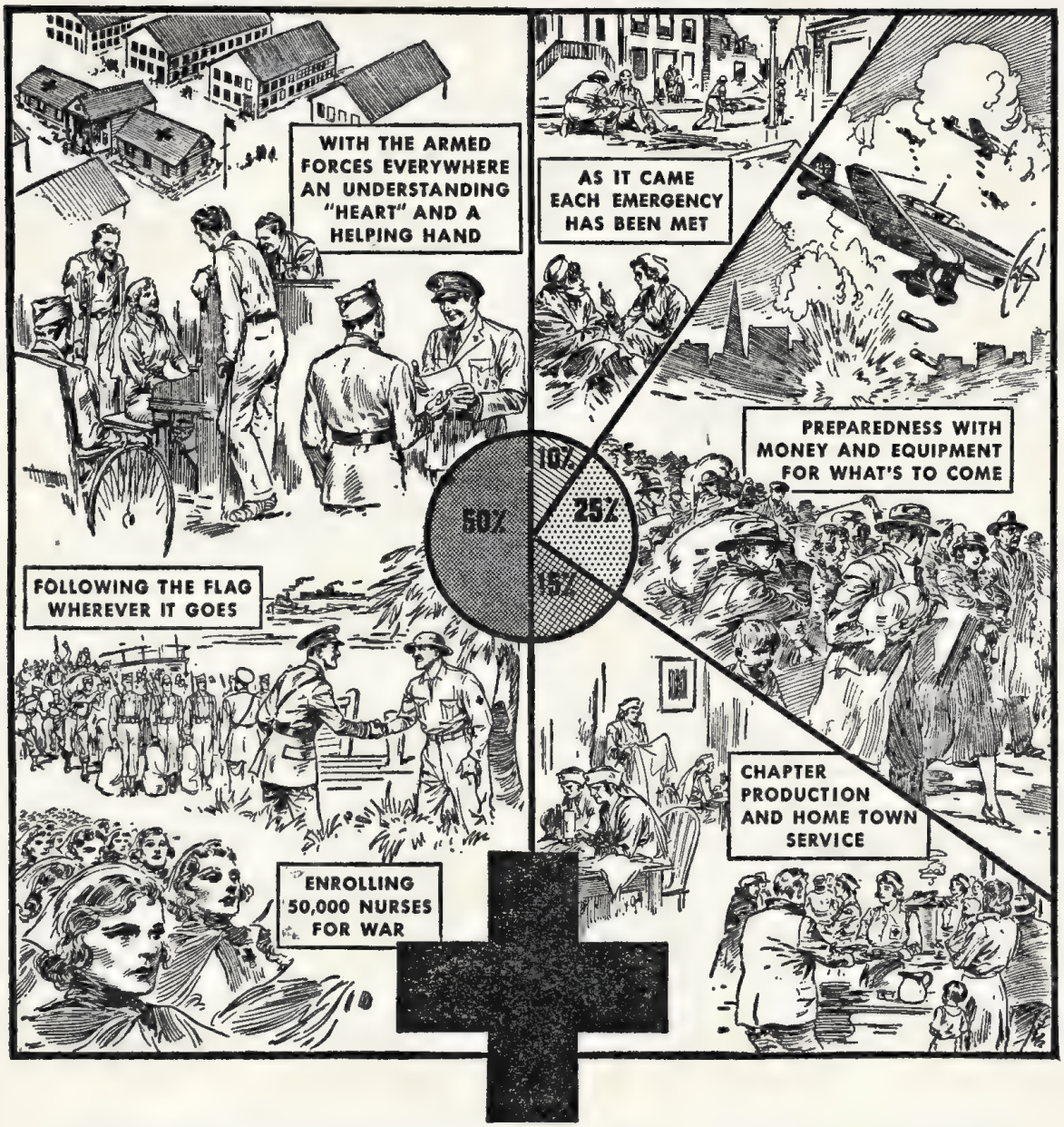
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★ Hoss Greer's Sixgun

When the entire cattle business of Arizona was threatened with total wipe-out, a dozen tough outlaw cowmen decided that Hoss Greer himself must lead their infected herd to a new range—and help them spread death and destruction throughout that desperate cattle-land empire!

Quarantine

Old Hoss cut loose with his Colt. . . .

A Novel of Outlaw Cowmen

By

Harry F. Olmsted

CHAPTER ONE

Hell-on-the-Loose!

TWO things, by his own boast, Old Hoss Greer would not do. One was to draw a gun on a man to run a bluff. And the second was to allow anything—fire, flood, sheriffs or illness—to keep him away from his one pleasurable indulgence, the Annual Hi-jinks and Stampede of the Arizona Bronc Straddlers Association, of which he was an honorary life member and perennial vice president. And, strangely enough, Hoss did both of these taboo things, one hard on the heels of the other. Thereby proving the frailty of man's good intentions and the futility of living by rule.

The Bronc Straddlers were meeting at Riverside Park in Phoenix that early May day. Bored stiff, he had listened to a speech of welcome, delivered by the secretary to Governor John V. Q. Search, but when the call to the barbecue pits was given, Hoss perked up considerably and showed a lot of early leg in getting there among the first.

He had a hunk of the savory roasted meat, a slab of hot sourdough bread and a pickle in one hand, a cup of coffee and a fat brown onion in the other, and was looking for a roosting place when he spotted Governor Search hurrying toward him, his bowed legs clumping on their high-heeled cowboy boots, his round face full of trouble.

"Hoss," he said, intercepting the man he had ridden range with, twenty-five

years before hooking his spurs into politics. "Glad I've found you, boy. We've got undiluted hell on the loose up around the Paradise Valley country. You still own the T Cross V up yonder?"

"Still own it, Alphabet," said Hoss, who always hoorawed the governor about his matchless worrying ability. "What's wrong up there?"

"Hoof and mouth, and I mean virulent. It's reported in from half a dozen different spots, all along the toe of the Crossflows. I've notified the U. S. Bureau of Animal Husbandry and I've sent Doc Peters, of our own Livestock Sanitary Commission, with a corps of veterinaries. Tomorrow I'm calling a special session of the legislature and no expense will be spared to stamp this thing out."

"You act awful excited," said Hoss. "We've had hoof an' mouth before an' lived over it. A week from now you'll have it stamped out, so keep your shirt on an' quit stewin'."

"Yes," the governor mopped his brow, "we've had an outbreak or two in the last twenty years, but they were local an' just plain epizootic. But this is something brought in by some Ozarkers that squatted at the mouth of Smoky Crick and turned loose some pigs on the oak mast there. Aphthous fever, Doc Peters has named it. It's runnin' like wildfire. We gotta scotch it an' I mean sudden, or our risin' cattle business will be business for the bone pickers. I'm lookin' to every one of you cowmen for a hundred percent coöperation. You in particular, Hoss."

"Me?" Hoss' eyes widened. "Why me? My T Cross V is clean over the Crossflow Mountains from the mouth of Smoky Crick, with the wind-whipped sand hills lyin' between."

"Nothin' like that will save you, Hoss. Buzzards feed on an infected carcass an' drop the disease on any man's range, within two-three hundred mile. Same for coyotes inside a fifty-seventy-five mile radius. Mebby the wind carries it; we ain't sure. Anyhow, I wasn't thinkin' of your ranch so much as I was of you. And the Apache Basin country. The last I heard it was movin' that way fast."

"Apache Basin." Old Hoss sneered. "Wasn't you the gent I heard talkin' about sendin' the militia through them hills if them rustlin' sons didn't draw in their horns? It's a poor wind that don't blow somebody good, as the feller said. Mebbyso a good dose of hoof an' mouth will wipe 'em out where the law has failed."

The governor looked shocked. "You know better'n that, Hoss. Outlaws or not, I'll not make any section of Arizona an incubator for epizootic as long as I'm governor. The trail Doc Peters will follow leads to Apache Basin. Doc is a tough customer but he'll be far too busy to argue with the renegade cowmen he'll cross up there. That's why I was thinkin' if you could go in there ahead of him and sorta do some missionary work, the job could be cleaned up quicker. How about it?"

"In other words, you want I should go in where devils fear to track their hoofs, an' where your tinbadges have been run out since three days after Genesis. You want me to unlimber my hip artillery against some of the worst tempers an' fastest draws in Arizona. Is that it?"

The governor held up a pudgy hand. "Not that, Hoss. I should say not. No gunplay. No violence where a soft word will answer. All I want is somebody with a convincing manner to talk them hombres into helping to stamp out an epidemic that can ruin them and everybody else." His left lid dropped slyly. "You understand?"

Hoss grinned. "I get you, Alphabet. I'll see what can be done."

The governor's hand shot out. "Thanks, pardner. Knew I could depend on you. Best of luck."

They shook. Hoss handed his food to Alphabet Search, turned on his heel and left the park.

★

AT THE Commerical House, Hoss buckled two guns onto his hams, checked out and got his Alisan from the feed barn. On the way out of town, he picked up a blanket, wrapped it around some canned provender and lit out for the Crossflow Mountains. Two days he rode across the burning flats, looking longingly off to the north where the comforts of the home ranch at Tres Alamos awaited him.

Ten miles short of the Crossflow Mountain toe, he spotted three milling whorls of black buzzards settling into the greasewood. Hoss knew well enough what he would find at the apex of those spirals, so he held straight on, his face grim and hard. Now that he was in the presence of this death-that-walks-along-the-ground, as the Apache calls hoof and mouth, it became more his personal problem. He rode on, scowling.

As he started up Smoky Crick Canyon, brush crackled. A mule deer doe broke into the clear, hobbling a few steps on bent legs then falling headlong. Hoss' gun flashed, roared. The doe relaxed mercifully, her pain ended.

Hoss grimaced as he replaced the spent shell. Epizootic clung to one spot and defied Nature to dislodge it. And yet it could outspeed the lightning-like feet of the mule deer. A tough enemy, but one that could be beaten by scientific measures, backed up by every human being within the infected areas. That backing must be won.

Hoss' lips tightened as his eyes struck upward through the pines toward the first of two main Crossflow ridges. Between those ridges lay the notorious Apache Basin, place of dark and bloody deeds, dating back to that day the first bold white challenged the fierce Coyoteros for its ownership.

That night Hoss camped at a small spring, where he carefully sponged his pony's hoofs with the small bottle of creosote he carried. Next morning at sunrise he was on the ridge, binoculars at his eyes, gazing at the verdant sweep of that tight little valley lying between the two timbered ridges of the Crossflows. Off north the parallel headlands came together on the breast of dominating Pine Mountain. Closer at hand, the ridges seemed cleft by unlighted chasms, where flowed the strange cross stream which gave the mountains their name. In his mind's eye, Hoss saw the ebb and flow of conflict which had drenched this land with blood.

"Peaceful enough now," he reflected, and lifted the glass for another look. Yonder he spotted the buildings of the IXL, headquarters of Mace Goswick, whose iron rule of this lawless hinterland had bent all denizens to his will or destroyed them. Back of the IXL, Hoss looked long and hard at a tall dust pillar rising over a low ridgeback. It was some time before he saw the cow herd emerge, outridden by close to a dozen horsemen. The cattle were being choused uphill, toward the far ridge, in a way that indicated no little hurry. And every foot they made in that direction took them a foot nearer Hoss' crack T Cross V, and its pure strain of Herefords.

Hoss, with his dander rising, put his pony down the slope, hit the valley floor and loped over. Due to the rolling nature of the land, they didn't spot him until he was close enough to see the great IXL sprawled across the ribs of the grade critters bawling their way up the ridge.

When they did notice him, they made up for their lack of alertness, spurring around the herd and sweeping toward him with bodies slanted and gun-hands poised.

Hoss reined in and let them come on, his slitted eyes watchful and chill. These were the men of Mace Goswick.

"H'are yuh, boys?" Hoss hailed them.

A racy cream and black paint came shooting between their loose ranks, carrying a man of thirty-five, maybe more. His features were deep chiseled and his green eyes were set under deep, shaggy brows. Under the wide brim of his dusty Stetson, his hair showed black as an Indian's. And, Hoss thought, the face, eyes and general proportions all indicated quarter-breed Apache, or mebby Comanche. Somewhere along the line, Goswick's blood had picked up Injun.

Goswick's yellow eyes swept Hoss in swift appraisal. Then his mouth, straight under a beak-like nose, twisted upward at the corners. Mebby it was a smile, mebbyso not.

His voice was unexpectedly soft: "Who in the hell are you?"

"I'm your neighbor."

"Yeah? What outfit?"

"T Cross V, in the Paradise. Name uh Greer."

Goswick blinked. "I don't look on Paradise country as neighborin' range. Too far off. But we'll be neighbors now, for a piece. I'm drivin' my stuff into the sand hills."

"Damn little graze there," said Hoss. "Howcome?"

"This rock country's hard on a cow's feet," said Goswick, almost inaudibly. "The sand heals 'em up."

"Heal up their mouths too?"

A pall of ugly silence hung over the cavalcade facing Hoss. Mace Goswick was suddenly mad as a teased weasel, and he hid it badly. "Greer, eh? Not Hoss Greer, by any chance. If I recall, you sport a gun rep of sorts. You may get a chance to prove it, feller. No matter who you are, you're as pleasin' to my eyes as a scabby sheep. Just what's your business in the basin?"

"I'm trailin' down a gent name uh Mister Aphthous—cattle killer. Seems he's sowin' the seeds of death across these ranges. Cows an' other critters eat 'em an' begin to sluff chains uh chin slobber. Then their hoofs git sore an' they lay down. The only way they get up is in buzzards' bellies. Seen anything of that, Goswick?"

"Range dick, eh?" sneered the Apache Basin boss. "Workin' fer a lot of two-bit politicians in Phoenix. Stickin' your bill inter other men's business, if they like it or not. Well, lemme tell you this, feller: You go back an' tell your bosses that they ain't puttin' the bee on me or my cattle. I've held this country ag'in' all comers, an' I'll hold it ag'in' anybody the governor wants to send ag'in' me. Tell him that. As fer them long whiskered loonaticks, smellin' of sheep-dip an' garlic, let 'em keep outa this valley, or they'll be comin' down with something that ain't hoof an' mouth. My cows are clean, an' I aim to keep 'em so myself."

"Clean like yonder bull, eh?" Hoss pointed to an animal silhouetted against the sky on the ridge top. Strings of drool cascaded from his aching gums and he kept shifting his weight from one hoof to another. "Your cattle are rotten with it, Goswick. . . ."

"Don't come none of that on me, you dried-up old crowbait." Goswick whipped out his .45 and Hoss looked clear down into his vitals. "For less'n two bits I'd give you a taste of this."

He whirled and his gun spat fire, once, twice, three times. The infected bull shuddered, sagged at the knees and rolled down the sharp slope.

"That's the way I handle a sick cow or a nosey politician. Go back and tell Doc Peters he'd better not show his head over the top of yon ridge. Come on, boys."

They whirled their ponies and raced back toward the bawling cattle. Hoss watched them go, struggling to quiet his

anger. For a short minute he pondered his next move, made up his mind and raced after Goswick. He caught the man as he reached the herd.

"I'll take your message down to Doc Peters," he said coldly. "But when I get back, that herd of yours still better be this side of the high ridge. If not, Mister Goswick, you're liable to be shakin' hands with Old Scratch himself." He spun the long legged sorrel about and loped away.

After him came Goswick's blistering retort: "Go to hell, you hump-backed stink lizard. You come back here an' I'll feed your carcass to the coyotes, gut by gut. Just to cinch it, I got more'n half a notion to comb you out now with lead slugs."

"Then who'd carry your messages for you?" Hoss fired back over his shoulder, and he was mad enough to wish Goswick would make a try at him, odds or no odds.

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CHAPTER TWO

"Lead Pills for Sick Cows"

OLD HOSS found the camp of the Livestock Sanitary Commission at the mouth of the Chimoris—a fine new red chuck wagon, olive drab tents without a stain on them, a heavy freight wagon exuding an unmistakable odor of unguents and a makeshift corral full of fine, fat mules. Somehow the outfit reminded Hoss of hunting parties he had encountered in the White Mountains.

"Bunch of political hangers-on, enjoyin' a vacation at the tax-payers' expense," he meditated, and reined his pony over to the sleepy-eyed Chino cook, regarding him from the door of the cook tent.

"Where's Doc Peters?"

"Him up along fi' mile to Blista Lock Cleek. Missa Pleston's Lazy P."

A Chinaman always had held a fascination for Hoss. This one was talkative and he had just baked a batch of peach pies. So Hoss took time out to eat, learning among other things what a man-driver Doc Peters was. Dawn to dark; that was his schedule, despite the groans of his trained decontamination corps. His ideas of Peters and the outfit had undergone a marked change before he met the man at Ike Preston's Lazy P Ranch, near the mouth of Blister Rock Canyon.

Doc Jonathan Peters; ranch born and bred, sternly trained, was driving himself as he drove his men. A skinny, unhealthy looking man with a great shock of iron-gray hair, he looked Hoss through with a pair of eagle-keen, bloodshot eyes.

"I've heard of you, Mister Greer," he said unemotionally. "And I've included several of your outfits in my reports, without having the pleasure of meeting you. I'm sorry I can't take time to visit, but I'm just going out now to finish up a dirty job."

"Hell's bells!" blatted Hoss, "I'm not here to visit! I'm here from the governor to find out the why's an' wherefore's of this epizootic business an' learn how far I can go in preventin' its spread."

"Go?" The scientist ran trembling fingers through that wild hair. "Go the limit,

man! Go all the way." His eyes burned. "Yesterday they killed Doctor Bard, one of my most promising assistants—shot him in the back when he started his sterilization of the Benton Place, up Chimoris six miles. We haven't time to fight back, Greer, and do our job in time. All I can do is turn the facts over to the U. S. marshal. And this is truly federal business because of its possible endemic nature. We can only hope the law will avenge this murder."

"Actually fightin' you, eh?" Hoss toyed with the terror of overworked men toiling under threat of bullets from the brush. "As I understand it, the cowmen are paid for all infected cattle killed."

"Paid, yes, but not what some of them think their stuff is worth. In other words, we pay them for beef, not pedigree. With their cows dying like flies, they howled to high heaven for us to do something. All we can do is to destroy the animals exposed. And there's where the shoe pinched. They began to drive their cattle out, hiding them in the hills. That spread the disease and increased the losses."

"Then they're not supposed to move a herd at all; is that right?"

"Positively not. If a herd has no active cases and none develops during the period of incubation, we can give it a clearance. Move such a herd across infected ground, and the whole bunch must be destroyed. Men like Ike Preston understand and give us coöperation, even though it's like cutting off their hands to watch us do what has to be done.

"Yes, if you want to help, it can best be done in the upper country. Mace Goswick, of Apache Basin, was down to see me yesterday. Bald Bart Hatfield, of Blister Rock Meadows, has sent down his defi. Bones Benton, of Upper Chimoris, must have had a hand in the murder of Doctor Bard, though of course I can't prove it. Washita Bawn, from Crossflow River, says he'll go as Goswick goes. Those four can undo everything I accomplish elsewhere."

"Mebby I'd better see them gents," said Hoss, "an' do a little augerin'."

"If you have any influence with them," said the scientist, "I'll take it kindly if you exert it. But before you start, come over to our pits."

Together they rode across the grasslands to the breaks of the Salada. Here began a region slashed and cross-cut with dry chrome gulches, crumbly cutbanks powdered with alkali and eroded sandstone lifts studded with stunted juniper. Dust hung over these miniature badlands and, topping a rise, Hoss looked down upon an unforgettable scene.

Yonder mule-drawn plows turned over the barren soil, followed at once by clanging fresno scrapers that moved the earth out. Five feet, the pits were going down. Fast as men and teams could work, the trenching went forward. Now a crew of stolid, silent punchers came over the hill, herding their moaning charges—two dozen of them, down an earth ramp into the pit.

Pausing to watch the sweep of it, Hoss hardly heard Doc Peters say: "Now comes our little hell on earth." Three bronzed old timers on the bank lifted their shiny new Winchesters, and the air shuddered to the concussion of gun-fire. The cattle, stricken with lead lightning, fell jerking. When the brutes were finished, sunburned assistants of Doc Peters jumped into the middle of that carnage, hacking at the bodies with razor-edged machetes, shredding the hides, laying open the quivering flesh. The chemical squad came next, spraying their milky cresol over everything. A few moments later the circling fresnos were covering the sight with earth. Nothing here for buzzards or creeping varmints to scatter.

Old Hoss sat his animal, watching, learning. Once he took his eyes from the rubber-clad, sweating sanitary squads to

a man and a woman who sat their horses some little distance away. The man, a young, stalwart fellow, hid his eyes when the rifles were speaking and his wide shoulders slumped dejectedly.

The girl sat straight in the saddle, white-faced, tight-lipped. Her chin was up and her fine mouth was trembling.

"Joe Floyd," said Doc Peters, "and his bride. Joe's Ike Preston's foreman and seeing what he's built destroyed is pretty near killing him. Seen enough to get an idea of what we have to do, Greer?"

"As to cows, yes." Hoss was thinking of that herd moving upward toward the west ridge of Apache Basin, heading for the sand hills where at least ten thousand sheep grazed range nobody wanted for cattle. Once those woolies were infected, no telling where a line could be set up to corral the disease. "There's gonna be some treatment needed for men, if I'm not mistaken."

"Humans very seldom get *epizootica,*" said the scientist, "and when they do, it is usually so light they. . . . Oh, I think I see what you mean." Doc Peters smiled, looking away towards the hills. Then, suddenly, his face was drawn, his eyes filled with the clouds of trouble. "And if I'm not very wrong, here come some now —for treatment."

★

A RIDER came loping gracefully down the slope. Behind him, bunched, were four more—wild, reckless young devils with pistols at their thighs and a riding skill that comes only from being moulded to a saddle instead of a diaper.

They came straight down the slope, their eyes questing. Then, spotting Doc Peters, the leader abruptly changed direction. They all reined down cruelly, rearing their lathered mounts as they plunged to a halt. The leader loosed the reins, stood in the stirrups, his fierce black eyes staring fixedly at Old Hoss.

Under his breath, the scientist muttered: "Bones Benton, BB iron, up Chimoris." Then, in full voice: "You want to see me, Mister Benton?"

The hill cowman looked surprised. "Know me, eh? You Doc Peters?"

"Doc Peters is right. And before anything more is said, I want you to know that you are under suspicion of murder, following the death of Doctor Bard on your lower range. You can expect a visit from the U. S. marshal."

Benton's flat belly shook with restrained mirth. "Murder, eh? That's a new one, ain't it boys? Listen, vet'inary." His laughter gave way to frosty-eyed bleakness. "Us hill men is used to havin' other men's levis hung onto us—just because we mind our own business an' keep on our own side of the fence. But murder's a new one, an' it ain't likely we'll just set back an' laugh it off. Now I'm a murderer. . . . Ha, that's good! What was this Doctor Bard doin' on my range when he was what you call murdered?"

"Quarantining your range and getting ready to do what you see them doing down yonder, Benton."

The man's eyes shuttled to the charnel pits. He said: "Trouble with you, Doc, is that you believe the hull outdoors was made fer your personal an' private benefit."

"Personally I don't count, Benton. At present I'm the Territory of Arizona."

"Doc Peters, Arizona or United States," raged the cowman, "it's all the same to me! I'm doin' what I like with what's mine, an' if anybody comes at me, it's with both eyes open. A lot of critters are gonna get their lights blowed out, but it ain't gonna be mine—don't forget it!"

Old Hoss, restless in the face of this lawless threat, spoke up. "Doc, take a look at Benton's bronc. That slobber looks

kinda yella an' too long an' stringy to be natural. Look, he's standin' on two hoofs an' favorin' two. An' his eyes look sorta feverish. You reckon . . . ?"

Peters lifted his arm toward the boxed-in wagon, where the field pathologist made his tests. "Truett!" he hollered. "Fetch your kit up here for a test." And then to the fuming-eyed BB boss: "We'll soon find out, Benton, and if he's sick he'll go into the pit with the rest!"

"He will, eh?" Benton moved as he spoke. His body went down over the withers and his .45 leaped to his fingers.

Maybe it was a bluff. Maybe those glittery lights dancing in his eyes were murder glints. Hoss couldn't be sure and he couldn't take a chance. Out came his worn gun, snapping forward. His slug took the sick horse in the neck, high up, dropping it and upsetting whatever plan Benton might have had.

More concerned with the source of the shot than that his mount was falling, Bones Benton turned his lidless black eyes on Hoss as he leaped clear. He landed like a cat, leaping to the stirrup of his nearest henchman. And as he moved, he sent a roaring muzzle-flame tearing at Hoss. His mount, suddenly rearing, grunted and fell, shot through the brain.

Hoss, quitting the stirrups, made no such graceful landing at Benton. And as he sprawled upon the ground, a bullet spatted alongside his head and one of the BB horsemen was squinting down the barrel for another shot.

Hoss, fully roused now, bit off a curse and shot blind. The man slumped from the saddle. Then Benton was bouncing alongside the terrified pony as he made a running mount, flattening like an Indian along the animal's side.

Hoss took a couple of snap shots from the ground as the riflemen at the pits were throwing lead at the four racing, swerving ponies—lead that served to hasten their departure. Now the brush hid the fleeing horsemen and Doc Peters was off his horse, helping Hoss up.

"That man came to murder me," he said, with conviction. "The poor fool hasn't brains enough to know this work will go on in spite of him or me or any line-up of opposition. Thanks, Greer. You act fast."

"Not fast enough to save my horse," said Hoss sorrowfully. "Got something here I can ride?"

"Take my animal," said the scientist. "Where you going?"

"To settle with Benton," clipped Hoss, stirruping his foot. "An' to keep the hill men from driving their hoof an' mouth into the sand hills where there's ten thousand sheep just waitin' to ketch it."

As he roared away, he did not even consciously think of his own cattle, just the other side of the sand hill range. But the threat to his own interests was present and that added no little to the fire that burned fiercely in his rugged old breast.

Some said it took gunsmoke to fully arouse Old Hoss. And gunsmoke had been burned.

CHAPTER THREE

Friendly Enemy

TEN miles up the Chimoris, Old Hoss found the first evidence of the BB gather. Here cattle had been driven in from two side canyons, bunched with those in the main drainage and driven off to the west.

He found other things too—strings of slobber clinging to the brush and bloody tracks along the canyon margin. Then he came upon a dead yearling. Its feet and mouth were glaring sores, but it was dead from a .45 slug. Killed because it couldn't keep up, not because it stood as a doom shadow over the rest of the herd. Left to be torn by buzzard and coyote, and then

spread from hell to breakfast and back.

From this point on, Hoss stopped frequently to paint the pony's hoofs with cresol Peters had given him, and lightly swab lips and nostrils. "Hate to be set afoot in this unhealthy country," he told the outraged animal. "An' you can't travel two mile on this slobber without havin' same yourself, unless I touch you up now an' then."

Through the first darkness, Hoss saw the lights of the ranch house ahead. This must be the BB outfit, and showdown with Benton. Tying his pony down in the shallow flow of the creek bed, he made his way through the gloom toward the house. What he could do here, he didn't exactly know. If Benton wanted gunplay, he could have it. Otherwise he was in for a ride back to Doc Peters' camp, where he would be held to answer for his assault.

Light streamed through two windows, at the corner of the house. All other buildings were dark and the place was quiet. Curious to learn just what he was up against, he catfooted to a point where he could look into the long living room of the log ranch house.

Benton sat there, bent over a table as if studying a map or reading fine print. Except for him, the room seemed unoccupied. Hoss turned aside, determined to walk right in on the man. And then the dog came at him from the darkness, snarling and barking venomously.

Hoss spun to face the brute, his hackles rising as they always did when he faced a vicious animal, whether two-legged or four. His hand went to his gun, and he kept a half glance for the front door, where Benton must be already heading. From beyond the baying brute a voice sheered: "Don't pull it, neighbor, unless you hone to fit a soon grave. Sky 'em!"

Caught foul, without a visible target, Hoss elevated. The dog lunged in, snapping. A man materialized, swinging a wicked boot. The canine yelped, slunk away, and a pistol bored into Hoss' kidney.

The man said: "March, brother, an' prepare to hub some hell. Benton don't like jaspers that come slinkin' around of nights."

And so Hoss, rumbling curses deep in his throat, was brought before the man he had come to take—a cynically smiling man whose cruel eyes promised a total lack of mercy.

Hoss' guard emptied his captive's holster. "Caught him snoopin' around, boss. Peekin' through windows. What you want done with him?"

Benton lifted his length and stretched it. "So you didn't get enough back yonder, eh?" he hummed. "Just had to foller along an' poke your nose into a box trap. A hired bodyguard for Doc Peters, you'll naturally augur that you was just follerin' his orders, comin' here now. You'll use the same excuse, likely, when you dropped my pony an' sifted lead into Ute Gillick. You hit him bad, feller?"

"I didn't shoot to cripple him," admitted Hoss. "For my money, he's stiff. But there's allus a bettin' chance that a man cheats a bullet. I didn't wait around to see."

"What you doin' up here?"

"Came to stop you movin' your herd, Benton. I piled up. But if I don't stop you, some other man will. That's an odds-on bet."

Benton beamed admiringly. "For an old codger, you're quite a tough hand. I have an idea Doc Peters sets a heap of store by you. That's why I'm not pumpin' a slug into your guts now, an' lettin' you lie. I aim to use you, feller. You'll drive my herd away from them microbe-snoopers an' provide insurance against lead being throwed at us."

"Think I will?" said Old Hoss.

"Damn right—or we'll plow you under as a dangerous case of hoof an' mouth! But I won't be hard. No drivin' at night

in these canyons. Tomorrow mornin', after sleepin' on it, you'll likely feel better about helpin' me out. Get the ladder, Lafe, an' put him on ice. Tuck him into bed an' tie his feet so's he won't kick the covers off."

Hoss' captor fetched a ladder, placed it against the wall and prodded Hoss up through a covered opening in the puncheon ceiling. A match touched to candle revealed a cornhusk tick and some dirty, ragged soogins.

As the squirrel-faced Lafe made ready to carry out his orders, Hoss watched for an opening. But Lafe was wary, and he soon had the old cowman trussed like a turkey. Before blowing the light, the fellow grinned.

"Sorry I can't rock you to sleep, feller," he said. "But the boss reserves that pleasure fer himself. Nighty-night."

Old Hoss was alone with the triple misery of cramped limbs, a corduroy surface torturing his body and the punishing thought that he had failed.

In the room below, the two men talked awhile and then went to bed. For hours Hoss listened to the snores, gulping down the stale air of the attic as he struggled to shuck the ropes. But Lafe had done too good a job. Along toward morning, Hoss gave it up.

His wrists and ankles stung where the ropes had brought blood. Every muscle of his body ached. Mentally, he told himself, he was "lower'n a snake's belly in a deep wheel rut". He fell into a shallow and troubled sleep.

★

HARSH voices and suffocating heat wakened Old Hoss. The room below seemed full of men. The happy music of meat frying in a skillet came up through cracks in the ceiling, along with the tantalizing aroma of hot food and coffee. A flat-toned voice was dominating all other sounds, and Hoss recognized it as the voice of Mace Goswick, renegade boss of the Apache Basin country.

"Hoof an' mouth ain't nowise different from measles," he declared. "All anybody kin do is to leave it run its course. What diff whether a cow die of the limpin' slobbers or from blind staggers brought on by Doc Peters' slaughter guns? A couple uh days of chousin' them cattle of mine around is plenty. I'm fed up!"

"What's on yore mind, Mace?" That was Bones Benton.

"How many men down there at them Preston pits?" Goswick countered with another question. "About twenty, includin' the Chink cook. We kin raise twice that many. Supposin' them politicians in Phoenix was to find their plows an' scrapers, mules an' wagons just layin' where they was left, without a man around 'em? Supposin' Doc Peters an' his outfit was to turn up missin', an' never be heard of again?"

"You mean . . . ?" A voice, thick with shock, was cut off by Goswick's sneer.

"Bart Hatfield, for some little time I've had my doubts about you. Are you so damned innocent you don't savvy what I mean?"

"No, but. . . ."

"No ifs, ands or buts about it, Hatfield! Either you go all the way with me or you don't go a-tall. An' you know what happens when a man. . . ."

"Oh, I'll go along," protested Bart Hatfield, owner of the H iron in Blister Rock Meadows. "You can't blame a man fer doin' some thinkin' about a job of wholesale murder. When I joined up, I didn't know you was dealin' in. . . ."

"I'm dealin' in practical ideas, Hatfield. You thinkin' uh quittin'?"

"I'm thinkin' it would be heaps better to go down an' invite them slaughterers up to clean up the sickness threatenin' to

wipe us out. But I'll go along with the majority. How do you feel about it, Washita Bawn?"

A sullen voice answered: "I think you're loco. Mace has got the right idee. Kill 'em! Kill 'em all, drop 'em in the holes they've dug an' sprinkle sheep-dip on 'em."

"Amen," added Bones Benton. "Bart's gonna go along like a good feller, ain't yuh, Bart? Sure. Now grab this grub an' go up that ladder. The prisoner will need a drink an' some food."

"Why not kill him?" suggested Mace Goswick. "It's a feller name uh Greer—a stove-up ol' cowman with a two-bit gun rep. He nosed into my business yesterday an' I sent him packin'. Slit his throat."

"In good time, Mace. I'm holdin' him as an ace in the hole if things get too warm. Besides, I can think of a better way to settle him than slittin' his throat."

They laughed and Hoss' blood ran cold at the utter lack of humanity in Goswick, Benton and Bawn. Hatfield, it was plain, was deviled with a conscience, but he was under the heel of three stronger, more ruthless men.

The ladder creaked and Hatfield came up with a tin plate of food and a pint flask of water. He proved to be a baldish, fleshy man of sixty, with a moon face, cherubic lips and eyes filled with trouble.

Benton, who had laughed uproariously at Hatfield's awkward ascent, called up. "Don't take them ropes off, Bart. You stay up yonder till you've fed him. If he's stubborn an' won't eat, stuff it down him."

Hatfield pursed his lips, shaking his head. With his eyes he was asking Hoss' understanding indulgence as he held the flask to his lips. With his lips he was cursing Hoss for being a nosey meddler and responsible for him—Hatfield—having to sweat in a musty, sun-cooked attic. All the while he cut the steak and fed it to Hoss without any roughness, he called him every dirty name he could lay tongue to. He was still cursing him after the feeding, when he slashed the ropes that bound Hoss, gathered up the eating tools and descended the ladder.

Left in the dark again, Hoss quietly exercised his blood starved legs and arms and listened to the workout of details for the annihilation of the sanitation squad—sole hope of the rampant epidemic being controlled before it assumed the proportions of a catastrophe. And as he listened, Hoss watched a tiny aperture of light being alternately blacked out and opened to the sky. He heard the savage hum of the winged insects entering there, and leaving. A hornets' nest hung only inches above his head! A careless swipe of that obloid gray bag, and a torrent of liquid pain would be loosed in the attic.

A faint but undoubted effluvia of decay hung like an aura about that nest and, watching the little brutes, Hoss learned they were fetching home carrion—rotting flesh cut from infected carcasses of BB cattle dead of the plague. Just another clincher in Doc Peters' list of the ways epizootic can be spread. From that, the nest led to other, more personal thoughts in Hoss' mind—thoughts leading to action.

Presently, when the numbness was gone from his wrists and ankles, Old Hoss permitted himself the ghost of a smile and carefully doffed his coat, shredded the lining and tied the sleeves off. This he put over his low-pulled hat, turning his collar up and buttoning the coat about his head. Splitting his big bandanna, he tied off the opposite corners, making two coverings for his hands—flimsy, but protection of a sort.

Now, with his pants tucked into his boots and as ready as he would ever be, Old Hoss squared around to face the trap door. A fragment of conversation came up to him, with the squeak of a door as the men trooped outside.

Mace Goswick was saying: ". . . an' me

an' Washita will have every man-jack of our outfits here before midnight tonight. Bart, you do the same, or you'll hear from me! Bones, we'll tell your boys to come on in, when we pass the herd. An' have meat fried an' coffee boilin' when we get in. In first shootin' light tomorrow mornin', we'll land on Peters an' his bug-killers all spraddled out!"

Talk drew away and Hoss heard the roar of hoofs as the departing renegades cut out to the west. At that moment Hoss could have lifted the trap, dropped to the floor of an empty room. But where would that leave him, without a gun?

So Hoss waited. And presently Bones Benton and Bart Hatfield came back into the house, Hatfield pleading with the BB boss to aid him in concocting something acceptable to Mace Goswick, short of murder. It was then that Old Hoss Greer jerked the trap door from its seat, ripped the hornets' nest from its rafter and hurled the humming globe of torment into the room below.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Notch Showdown

AS HOSS raised the lid and let his buzzing missile drop, he had a vision of two upturned faces, one stark with surprise. He heard Bones Benton's curse, saw him reach for his pistol. The gun was never fired. Benton loosed a bawl of pain, echoed by a screech of agony from Bald Bart Hatfield. Their arms were flailing like mad as the room filled with angry, stabbing insects, vengeful and venomous. Already attacked and stung through his makeshift protection, Hoss waited only until he reasoned Benton was unshakenly occupied. Then he let himself through the opening and dropped.

Hoss rolled, came up, leaped for the bed and flipped a blanket over Bart Hatfield who had gone to his knees and was covering his head with his arms, hollering bloody murder. Hoss brushed a yellow swarm from Hatfield's neck, appropriated his gun, covered his head with the blanket and dashed outside. Benton, having fled, was lifting his streaming head from the horse trough as Hoss emerged. He was badly stung but full of fight. Howling a curse, he drew and let fly. A dozen hornets dove at him just then and the bullet went wild.

Hoss, figuring Goswick and Bawn would hear the echo of that shot and return, wheeled, darted back through the hornet scourged room. He found Hatfield gone, the rear door open. And yonder loomed the log bunkhouse, the way to its door hidden from Benton's view.

Hoss cleared the interval in a dozen leaping strides, popped inside, gulping a breath and sagging to a bunk to let his breathing ease off. Getting old; wind getting short. One guess was as good as another how this crazy game would go.

Two things bulked large in Hoss' mind just then. He would always be grateful to Hatfield—a weakling who had risked his life to side a man who thought and acted naturally as he would like to think and act. And second, that sound. . . ."

Hoss stood up, listening to a tell-tale fluttering of the air that spelled gunfire. And close, too. "Coming from up-country," he muttered. "What's that mean?"

The answer came sooner than he expected—a roar of running ponies. Hoss opened the door, saw the horsemen race in, curb violently and hit dirt. Mace Goswick, Washita Bawn and seven hirelings. All highly excited as Goswick roaringly herded his followers houseward. "Git behind them logs, gun-wranglers, an' earn yore pay. Bones has Winchesters an' shells. Inside, an' shoot to kill!"

Shoot who? Hoss wondered, watching Benton come running toward them, his face swollen and distorted.

"No," Benton yelled. "Not in there.

Greer got loose, drove me out with hornets, finished Bart I reckon, an' wants us to come at him. What ails you jiggers? Howcome you're back?"

"Guns," rapped Goswick. "Canyon's full uh Peters' slaughterhouse gunies, looks like. We've hubbed a fight, Bones, an' now it's kill or get killed! But if we hold 'em off five-six hours, we'll rub 'em all out. I sent a man over the rim to raise ever' Pool lead-slammer. How's that bunkhouse? Tight?"

"Tight as a fort, an' a cinch to hold," said Benton, leading the way. "Wish I had them rifles an' ca'tridges, but I wouldn't go amongst them hornets again for a thousand simoleons!"

"Six shooters will do," said Goswick. "No wastin' shells till they rush us."

They came swiftly toward the bunkhouse door, Hoss giving back between the bunks and through a narrow door at the rear. He found himself in a rat-proofed cubby used to store grain. Shutting the door behind him, he waited in blackness, all his chips down on Fate's next turn of the cards.

Now the bunkhouse echoed to heavy boot-treads and the rumble of talk. The door was slammed, barred. Wary, Goswick barked: "What's behind yon door?"

"Rat-tight grain room." From Benton. "No openin's except the one you see. It's our blind side, an' the only way they can slip up onto us."

"Pesty!" Goswick's order rattled, "open up some shootin' holes in there with your shiv. Rest of you boys take places."

Boot steps approached the grain room and Hoss flattened against the wall. The door flashed open. Light streamed in, cut off as Pesty paused. "Cripes, it's dark!"

Hoss drew back his gun arm, holding the blow as turmoil broke outside. Hoofs were thundering, and among the loud voices came a command, harsh and peremptory: "Hello the ranch! Come out, Benton, reaching. Marshal Tom Clarkfield bellerin'!"

Bones was begging Goswick to answer, when Hoss struck Pesty, echoes of the blow lost in Goswick's profane challenge of the law. Hoss caught the falling man; laid him in the gloom, appropriated his six-full pistol.

From outside came new sounds of men and horses being deployed. A large posse, and—if Hoss knew Clarkfield—a thorough one.

The bunkhouse shuddered with the shots of the renegades and Goswick's cursing them for wasting shells. The posse were purposefully firing back. Glass windows shattered. Hoss hunkered, rolled and lighted a cigarette. Then, guns level at his thighs, he stepped into the smoke-filled bunkhouse.

His voice lifted tauntingly: "Looks like you boys are fixin' to annoy a United States marshal. Naughty, naughty! Ain't you ashamed of yourselves?"

Nine heads swiveled. Nine pairs of eyes flashed to Hoss, where he stood like a grim, fierce-eyed old eagle, covering them. Lean and weather bitten, with hornet bumps pimpling his face, Hoss was far from a picturesque figure. He showed his age and he must have looked none too formidable to them, despite the leveled artillery.

Five were sitting down, with gun rests over window sills, and one of these was Benton. Goswick, Bawn and two others were standing. Not one was fool enough to make a gunplay.

Goswick said nastily: "You, eh? I was misled by a skunk-stinkin' traitor that you was holdin' down the house. I walked right into his trap an' taken the bait."

"No, Mace!" Benton almost screamed it. "I didn't know he was here. Honest to God I didn't! He—"

"Shut up!" snapped Goswick. "Your guns has the authority, Greer, in a way of speakin'. But, lookin' at it from another

angle, we're nine to your one. You might get two-three of us, but—"

"Twelve shots in these cutters," broke in Hoss quietly. "I don't miss. I want you all to skid yore guns to the center of the floor, lift yore hands an' march."

"What we got to lose by swappin' smoke with the old codger?" asked the practical Washita Bawn gloomily. "You know what happens if that marshal—"

"Lots uh time," said Goswick. "If he starts, we'll finish him. If we start, he'll get some, but not all." His lips curled. "We're hangin' onto our smokewagons, Greer. It's your bet; what do you say?"

Heat crawled along Hoss' eyeballs and his lips went tight. By his words, Mace Goswick had proven himself smart and, to a limited extent, master of the situation. Yet such was their state, with enemies outside and under the drop from inside, they could not indefinitely stand the strain of it.

As Goswick turned his face to the light, Hoss had a glimpse of the ingrained evilness of his coarse face; a bulging, criminal brow; close-set, shoe-button eyes; an indefinable deadliness was revealed.

"Shy yore guns to the center," Hoss said. "I'm gettin' itchy-fingered!" He drew back the hammers of both guns.

Bones Benton, whose face resembled nothing human by this time, caved in. "He's got us, Mace," he whined, and skidded his pistol along the floor.

Goswick's cruel eyes blazed. "Gotta take up yore case first, you coyote!" And he struck with the speed of a panther.

His gun swung, blaring a slug into Benton, who screamed and kicked out his life beneath the window ledge.

Washita Bawn was swinging his gun. Hoss shot him without shifting his point. He fell and Hoss staggered as a bullet weakened his thigh. He came up against the wall, both weapons spewing their lethal loads. The crash of simultaneous gun-fire pounded the senses cruelly.

MACE GOSWICK stumbled, went to his knees, his icy eyes flooded with the lust to kill, hate-filled even as death touched him. His gun pointed down now and, unable to lift it, he sent bullet after bullet crashing into the floor before he toppled face down.

A sallow, long-complexioned gunnie, whose first bullet had nailed Hoss, was squinting for his second shot when Hoss' slug caught him between the eyes, killing him.

The old cowman was limping ahead now, his teeth bared, his guns spitting. Another renegade spun and fell. And another shot took Hoss in the right shoulder, numbing his fingers.

Five seconds had ticked into eternity; five men had been snatched from life. It was too swift to be entirely comprehended and the horror of it touched the four survivors. They bolted, almost took the door frame out as they sped into the open, their guns grounded, their hands reaching for the clouds.

Numb with bullet-shock, Old Hoss teetered after them, fighting lagging nerves and muscles as he reloaded.

He staggered wearily. His body mustn't let him down now. He had to get outside and see that those coyotes didn't slip through the cordon of Marshal Tom Clarkfield's posse!

Hoss had no sensation of falling, but the shock of hitting the ground half revived him. Someone knelt beside him. A strong, vibrant voice was in his ear and the neck of a flask clicked against his teeth.

Marshal Tom Clarkfield said: "Old Hoss Greer, by godfrey! When the governor asked me to keep a weather eye out for you, I didn't think it would be you who'd pull our chestnuts out of the fire. Here, le's see.... *H'mm!* Bloody scratch in the leg an' a busted collar bone. Another week you'll be good as new. Mebbe better!"

"I see you got Bones Benton. Ex-

pected to have to kill him, but not without the cost of three-four men. Especially after our bad break of runnin' smack dab into two of Benton's men an' lettin' 'em get away from us."

"Benton's men, eh?" Old Hoss still had a laugh in him. "Sure would have burnt them boys up to hear you call 'em that."

To the possemen crowding around, Clarkfield said: "Shock. It sure knocks a man silly for awhile. Think I'll leave a couple of you boys here to look after the old man while the rest of us go up after Goswick, Hatfield and Bawn."

"Merry hell an' horned frawgs!" yelped Hoss, warmed by the whiskey in veins. "Since when do I need hand-nursin' account of a couple of measly slugs? An' you better get that talkin' silly idea out of yore head, Marshal, an' check with me on who to ride after."

"What you mean, Hoss?"

"There lies Mace Goswick," said Hoss, pointing. "An' that 'un's Bawn. . . ."

"And here's Bald Bart Hatfield," said a posseman, shoving the swollen hill cowman before him.

"Well I'll be damned!" said Clarkfield. "Our job's all done, boys. Doc Peters can go ahead now an' clean up this epidemic without having his boys popped off; Hoss Greer gets credit for killin' five of these damned renegades, an' the law will hang Bart Hatfield."

Shakily, Hoss got up, bracing himself. "Wrong on all counts!" he said. "Job's only half done, 'cause the gun-slingers of the Pool will come roarin' down here tonight an' they'll have to be whupped before Doc Peters can clean up the Chimoris, Crossflow River an' Apache Basin. As for me, I don't get credit for killin' nobody. These bloodsweatin' three quarreled among theirselves an' Goswick killed Bones Benton, thereby loosin' a wave of killin'. The governor ordered no violence an' I done my best to prevent same. As for Bart Hatfield, he's earned the law's thanks."

"Yeah?" Marshal Clarkfield looked dubious. "Howcome? I've had it pretty straight that he's one of the renegade outfit that's terrorized this country."

"Hogwash!" snorted Hoss. "Mebby he has had to talk sorta soft to Goswick an' his kind. So would you if you'd had to be neighbors to 'em. But Hatfield was all against the Pool skullduggery, without bein' able to do nothin' about it. He cut me loose after Benton had nabbed me, an' I paid him back by rollin' him under a hornet stampede. Except for him, you'd be fightin' a stubborn battle right now, an' open to a raid from Apache Basin."

There was a quick change in the looks cast at Hatfield, who maintained a discreet silence.

The marshal said: "If Hoss Greer vouches for you, Hatfield, that's good enough for me. You two are sort of scarred up, and I reckon you'd admire to go on down to Peters' camp and rest. We'll take care of the Apache Pool men when they show here."

"Rest?" Old Hoss affected an overdone swagger. "You think that's what brung me into this uncurried neck uh hell? You think Hatfield's gonna ride out, with nothin' bigger than a hornet fight under his belt? Not on yore tintype. Smear some axle grease on his swole face; whip a couple bandages an' a arm sling onto me an' we'll make you a pair of good gun-hands. Ride out of a good fight—an' rest? Pee-ew!"

And Old Hoss Greer grinned back his pain, downed another snort of the marshal's red liquor and prepared to play out the last hand in a game destined to open Apache Basin to honest men, and to make control of the epidemic a routine matter instead of a territorial catastrophe.

THE END

★ RED TERROR

A bullet-scarred young veteran of Gettysburg, Sam Poole returned to Texas, to learn tragically that the war in which he had so valiantly fought was only a prelude to the red hell of bloodshed and gunflame that was soon to take grim toll of every honest cowman in the Lone Star State!

Sam Poole stood over Pop's dead body, his gun blazing....

CHAPTER ONE

Bait for a Man-Trap!

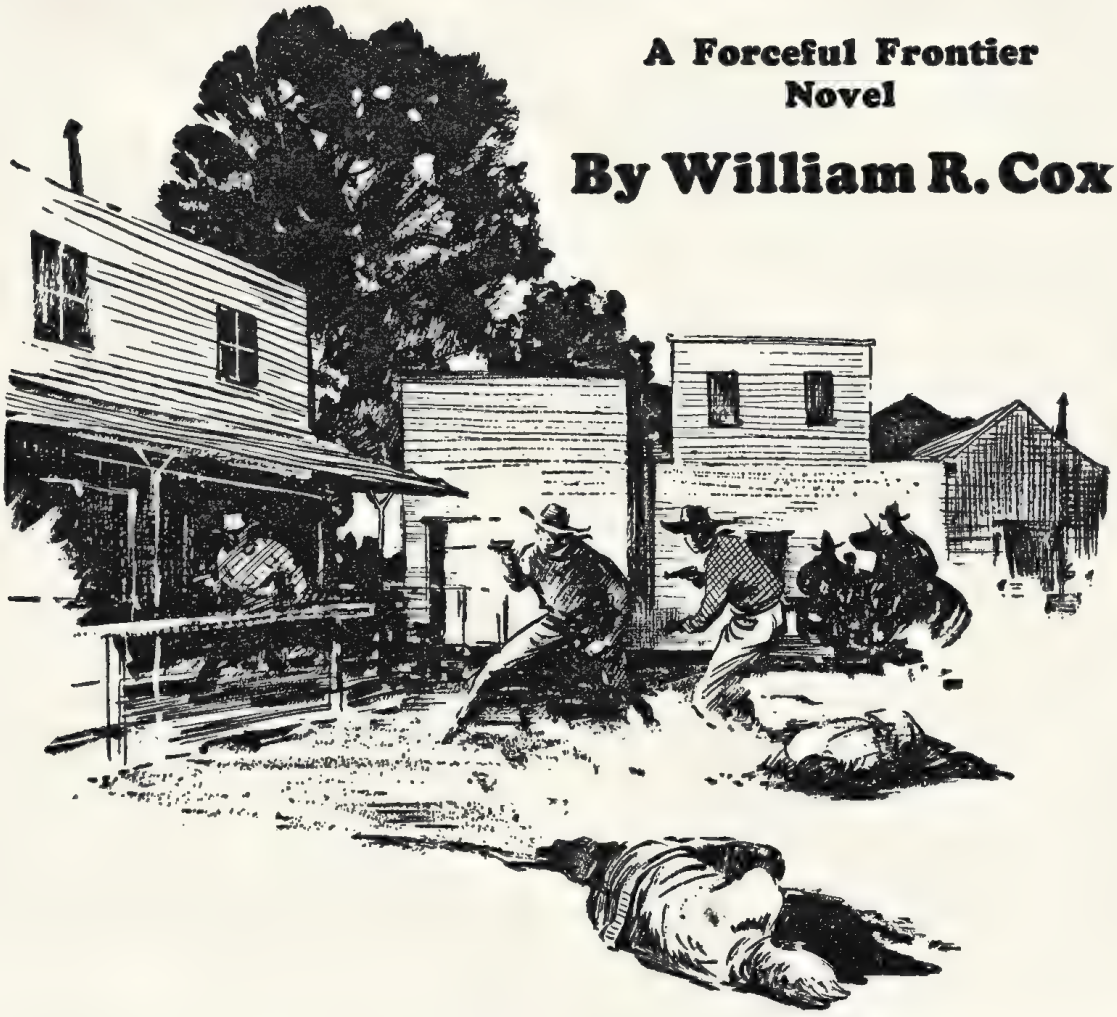
THE way through Missouri had been terrible, torn as it was with the two factions which fought each other bitterly while the armies on the eastern front decided the issue. Fort Smith was worse, for a girl alone, Sam Poole thought, pushing his hat to the back of his head.

She wore a green riding habit, which was sensible in that country, and walked timidly among the Indians, the whiskey peddlers, gamblers, outlaws and hetero-

FOR TEXANS! ★

A Forceful Frontier Novel

By William R. Cox



geneous emigrants of all sorts and shapes.

Arkansas was a stopping-place en route to Texas. The Lone Star State would be filling up with the desperate men of the South, the dissolute who sought to escape the ravages of war. Poole leaned against a post, resting his wounded leg. He was out of it, for once and all. He was through with War Between the States. He was convinced, since Gettysburg, that the Cause was lost, that it was time to rebuild for the future.

Sam Poole was a medium-sized young man, with dark eyes and a pale, hospital-face, which would fill out under Texas sun once he had regained the Bar Y, where his father raised Texas steers. His leg bothered him badly and incapacitated him for further soldiering, even had he a mind to continue the useless fight. . . . And now he watched the girl with the burnished hair and thought that she was very pretty indeed.

A drunken man in cowpuncher's clothing brushed rudely against him, knocking him away from the post. Sam lost sight of the girl in the crowd as he righted himself, balancing on his good leg.

The bigger man said, "Get outa the way, dude!"

Sam had almost forgotten he had been wearing the black, tight trousers, the formal coat and white shirt with frilled front which had been a passport through the

country, proclaiming him a crippled man of business.

He said sharply, "Hit the dust, puncher!"

The man stared, and Sam saw that he was not very drunk. He said, "Well, I'll be damned! Jeb Crane!"

Jeb Crane was a lean figure, like the bird for whom he was named. He had a glinting, sharp eye and quick, nervous hands. He seemed amazed and ill at ease. Tom said, "How is Pop, Jeb? Everything all right at the ranch?"

He had not expected to see a Bar Y man here, so far from the Valley. Jeb had worked for his father for years. Since Sam was a button. Jeb had taught him much about range lore.

The lean man said uncertainly, "Val McFee is in town, Sam. Your father know you're comin'?"

"I'll send him a message from here," said Sam. "What's new in the Valley? Things are hard, I suppose."

There was another man, over across the walk. He had paused, Sam realized, when Jeb stopped. They were together, he supposed. The man had red hair and a scar on his left cheek.

He was edging forward, now, through the stream of people who came and went, and suddenly there were not any people around the immediate vicinity. Then Sam saw a third man, who wore two guns tied down to his thighs. Jeb began to back nervously away, and Jeb's gun was slung handy, too.

The experienced citizenry were ducking for cover. The setup was very plain to everyone within sight, and word ran from mouth to mouth. The hardware man closed his storm door with celerity, behind the red-headed one. Sam could see it all, now, like the unreeling pattern of a battle scene he had witnessed once from a hilltop, before his company went into action.

They were flanking him, and he did not even have a gun. He pushed away from the post, following Jeb. In one horrified instant he realized that Jeb was in on it—that his father's ranch-hand was part of an impromptu plot to kill him! The red-headed man must be one of Val McFee's cohorts. The other was a stranger, too, but McFee was always changing his help.

There had been war along the Sawmill Range down in Texas ever since the fist-fight when Pop Poole had beaten Val McFee. There had been mutual recriminations, charges of stolen beeves and horses. Men had been mysteriously shot, and Val McFee hated Pop Poole. But Sam had taken very little part in it, and he had gone to the War when he was nineteen. This was unexpected.

He could hardly believe it of Jeb Crane. He moved forward, not taking his eyes from Jeb's gun. He was tired, worn, and he wanted no part of further battle. He reached out with a swift, lean hand. He caught at Jeb's wrist and turned him half around, saying, "You wouldn't run one on me, would you, Jeb?"

His right hand snaked down and snatched at the gun-butt. Jeb tried to twist away and the other two closed in. Sam got Jeb in front of him. He was weak from the long siege in the hospital, but he was desperate, too, and cold sweat was on his brow. He clutched the gun, cocking it.

Jeb whined, "Now, Sam, don't go off the handle."

The red-headed man said, "Get away from him, Jeb."

The one with the two guns was hesitating. Jeb said, "Don't start anything, boys. Not now."

A squat man with long arms came out of a saloon and walked briskly towards them. He saw the joining of battle and stopped dead. He had a square, stolid face and overhanging brows and he was dressed in store clothes, his pants tucked into boots.

Sam called, "Move on in, McFee. I'd as soon kill you, too. If anyone makes a break, he gets it."

The people in the background were running now, save a thin man with whiskers and an Indian who was too drunk to bother. The thin man came forward. In his hands was a sawed-off shotgun.

He called, "Sam Poole! Come this way!"

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SAM moved at once, tossing Jeb aside. The lean man tried to grab his gun away from Sam. The red-head half raised his hands and the two-gun man froze at sight of the lethal shotgun.

Sam took advantage of the pause to feint at Jeb with a left, as the professional boxer in his regiment had taught him. Jeb ducked, and Sam came down with the muzzle of the heavy Colt's revolver. He caught Jeb a glancing blow, but hard enough to drop him face downward on the walk.

Val McFee did not even blink. The two gunmen were as impassive as Chinese idols.

The slim man with the whiskers said, "Follow me, Poole!"

They went rapidly through the crowd. McFee's eyes were hard, following them. Sam limped along, his leg hurting more every minute, the gun tight in his hand. They reached a corner and turned, running a little, Sam making a step-and-a-half to keep up with his companion.

The stage coach stood at the front of the station. Behind them were voices, and the sound of pursuit.

The stranger said, "There are dozens of guerillas in town. Did you notice they wore black slouch hats? That's their unofficial uniform. They've been raising hell hereabouts."

He was a well-spoken man, younger than Sam had thought at first glance. His beard and his hair were blond and he had contrasting brown eyes, very steady. His hands were sure on the shotgun.

"Have you got a horse?" Sam asked.

"Nary horse," said the stranger. "But we could try this!"

The stage-box was deserted. A Negro held the horses. Before Sam could reply, the stranger had clambered to the box and gathered up the reins. Sam made a half jump and managed to get up beside his cool rescuer. He said, "We'll catch hell for this!"

"Might as well get hung for a sheep as a lamb!" said the man, his whiskers parting in a grin. "Giddap!"

The Negro ducked. The horses started off. The agent and the driver came running out, bellowing in rage. Down the street a man with a rifle knelt to take aim. The stranger snapped the long whip and the horses gave a sudden leap. Lead whistled by Sam's ear.

The horses hit a slight down grade and began to run. At the bend in the road they were stretched out and the Concord coach swayed dangerously on two wheels. Sam's friend could really drive, he saw. The thin, brown hands were like steel on the leather. The horses hit the straightaway and were like the wind, fleeing from the danger of bullets.

Sam shouted, "This is really something! I hope the mail didn't get put on. That would be bad!"

"I'm Morgan Reese," said his companion. "I got word you were coming through and I wanted to see you. There's hell to pay in the Sawmill."

Sam said, "We'll take care of that when we come to it, Reese. What I want to know is what do we do with this coach?"

"We'll leave it somewheres outside Preston," said Morgan Reese gaily.

"Yeah," said Sam. "But what about the girl?"

"What girl?" demanded Morgan.

"The passenger down in the coach,"

said Sam equably. "I noticed her when I got on."

Morgan Reese said, "Well, I'll be a son!"

"She looks like a nice girl," said Sam gently. "I wouldn't swear, if I were you!"

CHAPTER TWO

Come Home—and Die!

SHE had bright red hair and her eyes were twin daggers of gray steel, facing them. "You—you robbers! You thieves! How dare you kidnap me?"

Morgan Reese had pulled up beside a sparkling stream, ten miles out of Fort Smith. There would, thought Sam, be horseback pursuit, and probably it was just as well. He wondered if they could ride a pair of the stage animals bareback. His bad leg would make very tough going of it.

The girl was certainly pretty. She was madder than a wet hen, but it only made her more attractive.

She said, "Wait until my uncle gets hold of you! He'll fix you!"

"I'm afraid we didn't have time to pick up your uncle," apologized Morgan. He was a very smooth young man, Sam thought, and it was surprising that he had known of Sam's coming. Because of the strife throughout the countryside which he had traveled since leaving the hospital, Sam had not divulged to anyone his whereabouts nor his itinerary. Even Pop did not know exactly when he was coming through.

"My uncle is Val McFee!" the girl was saying proudly. He'll make you answer for this!"

Sam blinked. So Val McFee had a niece—and a pretty, red-haired one, at that! Back along the road he could hear the tremor of hoofbeats.

He said, "I believe McFee is coming now, Reese. Perhaps we had better leave the lady."

Morgan listened for a second, said, "Yes. Perhaps we had better leave her. I regret very much, miss, that we must go. Perhaps we will meet again." He was very merry. Sam admired him.

There was a rifle on the box, which he brought along. Morgan Reese had the shotgun and a couple of revolvers.

The girl said, "I'll send them after you! You should be taught better than to steal stage coaches."

"If you do," said Reese dramatically, "they will hang us to the nearest tree! Remember that!"

He walked across the road, removing his hat in a sweeping gesture. Sam saw the girl bite her lips, saw her glance slide from Reese to himself, saw her look away. He knew then that she would not tell which way they had gone.

He followed Reese into the woods which lined the road at this point. There was a stream of clear water flowing towards town. Morgan started up along the bank, to the hills.

Sam took a last look at the girl. She was standing in the middle of the road, looking back to where the pursuers must soon appear. She was tall and graceful and the red hair reflected the evening sun. Sam shrugged and followed his new friend. So that was his father's enemy's niece!

Reese said, "We'll go up to the top of the hill. If there are a couple of boulders, we could hold off an army. How's the leg, Sam?"

"Bad enough," muttered Sam. "This is a crazy business. What does it all mean?"

"I can tell you a little," said Morgan Reese. "When we get time to draw a breath. Can you make it?"

He lent a surprisingly strong shoulder and Sam hopped valiantly. The lead had been probed from his thigh, but the mus-

cles would take a time in healing. He gritted his teeth and climbed on, with Reese's able assistance.

It was a small hill, though steep, and there were large rocks, and finally a nook which was snug and which could indeed be defended. They sank gratefully into it and poked the rifle in position to command the ascent.

For awhile they just rested, listening, without words. The road was close enough for them to detect the sound of the riders coming up. There was a rattle of harness and some confusion, and Sam could distinguish the deep bass voice of Val McFee.

Then the coach retreated towards Fort Smith, and there were several horsemen who rode south, away from the place.

Morgan Reese chuckled, "I knew she wouldn't tell them. Women can't resist courteous treatment."

Sam said, "You know a lot. Like you knew I was coming through."

"I'll tell you about that," said Reese. His manner was engaging, his face devoid of guile. "We have an organization. The guerillas have become a terrific hazard to the well-being of the ranchers. Or to any respectable people. In the name of patriotism they loot and steal. They ran off a herd of your father's cattle last week. McFee has suffered, too. So we have organized some Texans—good men. And we have ways of knowing—an underground telegraph, you might say—where our people are and whence they are going. Your father knew you were invalided out of service, and we put the word out to protect you coming in."

"Pop's all right?" demanded Sam. "They haven't—?"

"Pop's fine," said Reese. "He'll meet us at Preston. The problem is, to get horses to ride to Preston. There's a friend nearby. . . . Can you walk a mile or so?"

Sam said, "I can, but I won't enjoy it. What did I do, jump from one war into another? Who are these guerillas?"

"We have reason to believe that their headquarters is in the Sawmill," said Reese. "We don't know exactly who they are, except that Jeb Crane is one of them. Crane quit your father a year ago and has been employed by McFee most of the time since. But he takes vacations, and is not seen."

"McFee!" said Sam. "I begin to see. Yes, I'm quite sure that I understand this."

"Never be too sure of anything," cautioned Reese. "These marauders are clever at covering their tracks and mostly they wear masks on their raids."

"Yes," said Sam. "Night riders. All right, Morgan, shall we walk? May I take your arm?"

Reese managed the guns and gave a shoulder to Sam's halting progress. It was nearer two miles than one, Sam found, but he shut down hard on his teeth and went on. This was like walking off the battlefield at Gettysburg. This was refined torture, and at any moment the pursuers might find they had been deceived and get onto the right trail.

They went slowly through the gathering dusk. The little farmhouse was a welcome sight, and Sam sat on a tree trunk, refusing to budge another inch.

Reese said, "Well, I don't blame you. It was a game journey, Sam. You're tough."

Sam shrugged. "I want to get to Preston and talk to Pop. I'm tired of wars. I want to end this one, quick."

Morgan went off to borrow horses and Sam pondered the news which his newfound friend had conveyed. Morgan Reese was a cool hand, all right! If the tough Texans got behind a man like Morgan, it seemed to Sam that the guerillas would fade quickly from the scene.

Val McFee was a hard man. If the outlaws were hiding in the Sawmill

Range, it was very possible that McFee shared in their misdoings, Sam thought. That girl, that red-headed beauty, would be walking right into bad trouble. The Texans would make short work of McFee, and then real peace would come to the Valley, with the feud between the Bar Y and the Box Jack vanished.

Pop would be in there, fighting. But Pop was getting old, and should be spared that sort of thing. A man's reflexes are important in gun battles, and Pop was not steady any more.

Sam always thought of Pop as a charge, someone to look after. The big-bodied man who was his father had been always impractical, over-generous. When McFee had committed overt acts in the feud between them, Pop had often laughed and refused to retaliate.

Pop had been well-educated, back in Alabama before he came West, and there were always books around the Bar Y, and Sam could read when he was just a little shaver. Pop insisted upon that, and Sam was very grateful. It had given him much pleasure, and in the East, through the War, some advancement. Yes, Pop had been very good to Sam, his only son.

Sam could not remember his mother, but she had been a very great lady, he knew. She had died when he was born, and then Pop left Auburn and came to the Valley and began raising cattle. Pop believed in cattle, and Sam agreed.

If peace could be arranged, Texas would grow great on the long-horned steers which ran half-wild across her plains. Sam wished Morgan would hurry with the horses, if any. He wanted to get to Pop and get started, bad leg or not, in a war to end war. . . .

MORGAN came, leading two cow ponies. He said, "These little devils will carry us to hell and back if necessary. Here's meat and bread. Eat, and we'll get going."

They rode through the night, and at daybreak they slept. Morgan kept a careful watch, for he said that there were men who knew his work and would kill him on sight.

They came finally to the Red River and forded it, and then they were in Preston, which was Texas, and Morgan said that he was safe enough, for there were men who were on the right side and who would look out for them.

Preston was a busy town, because of the ford, and there were a number of people about. The stage was in, Sam saw, and then he saw the girl. She was coming out of the post store, and in her hand was a small package.

She looked at the two young men and her face froze. Morgan leaped across the walk and swept off his hat in that flowing gesture of which he was master. The girl's back was stiff, but Morgan had her by the elbow and towed her back into the store, where he could talk. Sam watched with great amusement. Morgan was certainly a cool one!

A man came swinging down the street, his blue eyes shining. He was white-haired, red-faced, jovial, a big man with long legs.

Sam yelled, "Pop! Hey, Pop!" grinning and excited.

A dozen people smiled at the two men so much alike, except in size and age. The Poole blue eyes were identical, the set of the head, proud upon strong shoulders, the white teeth that flashed in pleasure at their meeting.

Pop said, "Sam, I'm right glad you're home!"

"Me, too,," said Sam holding tight to his father's hand. "You look mighty fine, Pop."

"Got you a wound, eh?" said Pop. "You're peaked, son."

Morgan Reese and the girl came out of the store. She was still angry, but Sam could see that Morgan had half-mollified

her. Morgan saw Pop and waved his hand, but Pop, to Sam's amazement, frowned, and there was a storm cloud on his usually good-natured face.

There were several men at the edge of the porch of the sotre. Morgan was still jawing at McFee's niece, and Sam wondered where the choleric ranchman was at this moment.

The lounging men on the porch came to life, spread out in that familiar pattern and Sam called, "Morgan! Look around you!"

From somewhere a voice called, "That's Poole and his damned brat!"

Pop wheeled around, the ire still on his brow, his hand sweeping to his side. His other hand pushed out, at Sam. He said, "Get out of it, son. It's a shoot-out. I feared it was coming. Get away from here!"

The men were going for their guns. It was pre-arranged to a certain extent, Sam thought. He had his gun in his hand, now. Someone fired a shot which ricocheted harmlessly and Sam fired at the nearest gunman, a man in a black slouch hat.

Sam's man went down and Morgan was thrusting the girl back towards the store and trying to get in a shot with his own revolver. Pop turned loose his big frontier Colt's and the booming reports cleared the streets.

Fort Smith, then Preston, and guns going all the time. Sam was grim, trying to get past Pop, trying to throw bullets which would kill. A brilliant scarlet curtain of anger was before him. Lead scaled against the store, and the girl went indoors like a flash. Morgan shot a tall man away from the porch.

Pop was giving them hell, and they were ducking and hiding, now. There must have been half a dozen of them, all strangers to Sam. There was no sign of McFee. The whine of the rifle bullet was frightening, though. Sam wheeled about, but could see no one with a saddle gun.

Pop said, "Behind the store, Sam! Two horses. I brought Clown for you—he's still a good 'un."

Even in battle, Pop could think of Sam and his horse. This lousy trap—McFee could set it and stay out of it. If they got Pop. . . !

Sam had no thought of danger to himself. He crouched, waving the gun, searching for victims. They were all running now. The rifle spoke again.

Pop went down and lay there on his side, breathing in short gasps. There was a hole in his left chest. Another rifle bullet whanged, and the retreating men paused now, and a murmur went up that rose to a mocking cheer. Sam shot at the one behind a rain barrel and made a hit, he thought.

He was, he was amazed to find, blubbering like a baby. Morgan Reese was pale-faced, coming forward.

Pop whispered, "Never thought they'd get me, Sam. You got to run, son. The town is full—of them—I know about them. . . ."

Pop could scarcely talk. Sam leaned closer, trying to watch the attackers and listen too.

He heard Pop say, "Back to the ranch, Sam. A letter—in the Bible. It tells all. McFee—"

Pop Poole sighed regretfully and died there in the dust of the street. Then Morgan Reese had Sam by the arm, stopping him. Sam snapped down on an empty gun.

Morgan said, "The horses, Sam. This is all wrong. My men were led away on a wild goose chase. Let's ride!"

Sam stood, stiff and silent. He looked down at his father. The rifle was banging again, and bullets were cutting into the dirt all about him.

Sam said stiffly, "Get the horses. Let Pop stay here. I won't try to take his body now. I'll stay here, and—"

"You must come!" said Morgan. Lead came closer although the pistol-throwers were mostly out of range by now. Morgan tugged, and Sam went along, his chin on his shoulder, saying good-bye to his dead father.

The girl in the store was white and horrified. Sam caught one glimpse of her as he turned around to stumble where Clown and a fancy black mare were waiting. "McFee. . . ." his father had said, dying.

Well, there would be the settling of that account later. There were guns and ammunition at the Bar Y, and there would be Texas men, Morgan said.

For a brief second, Sam remembered his father's displeasure at the sight of Morgan Reese. And at the same moment he recalled that Morgan had felt safe in Preston, had said that help was at hand. Where was the help which could have saved Pop?

Sam spoke to Clown, and the painted pony nickered. They were in the saddle, leaving the two worn cayuses at the rail in front of the store. Morgan rode like a centaur and he was very handsome. Was it possible that something off-color marred this new friend?

Sam sat in the stock saddle, favoring his bad leg, and rode for the Valley. Pop was gone, but the ranch was still there, and the longhorns, and a feud yet to be settled. There would be time for reflection later—and Morgan Reese would be weighed. Everything would be considered, and tried in the crucible of the awful wrath and poignant hurt which the death of Pop had brought to Sam Poole.

CHAPTER THREE

Murderers' Invasion

THE two ranches lay one on either side of Sawmill Range. The Box Jack was to the north of the serrated foothills, the Bar Y was fifty miles south and west. There should have been three or four men around the buildings of the Bar Y, but the place was empty and deserted.

Morgan said, "Something has gone terribly wrong. That ambush in Preston, and now this. Sam, my friends have failed me. I feel a terrible responsibility about all this. . . ."

Sam's leg buckled as he dismounted, but he hopped to the adobe house of his youth. The sun was low and the elongated shadows added to the disorder and ghostliness of the scene.

Inside there was wreckage and confusion. Furniture had been rooted about and upended. Bright Indian rugs lay in rumpled disorder. The precious books were strewn about, their pages maculated, and this hurt Sam worse than anything, for Pop had loved his books.

The Bible lay in a corner. Sam rescued it, flipped the limp pages. There was no letter.

Morgan stood upon the doorsill, his keen eyes darting like lizards over the carnage. He said, "Someone will pay for all this. I swear it, Sam!"

Sam's face was ashen, pinched. "Pop left a letter, in case anything happened. In the Bible, he said. It's gone."

"Pop must have discovered something. Something that brought this all to a head," said Morgan. "I don't have the faintest idea what it was, Sam. If we only knew! Your men—there are half a dozen working the range, standing guard against the rustlers. But where is the rest of them?"

In back of the corral they found them. There were two, an old Mexican named Miguel Carranha and a man Sam had never seen. They were dead. "I guess the others were run off," said Sam dully. "Or deserted, like Jeb Crane."

"I didn't see Crane in the fight at Preston," mused Morgan. "Nor McFee."

"Pop was killed by a rifle bullet," said

Sam bitterly. "By a hidden marksman. That would be McFee."

Morgan stroked his blond whiskers and went mechanically to the task of righting the room. Sam sat upon a rawhide chair and put his head in his hands.

Morgan said, "I know about the feud. But how did it start, Sam? Have you any recollection?"

"Only that Pop and McFee had a fist-fight. There were no witnesses. But McFee was in bed for days. Pop beat him. After that there were always quarrels, except that Pop never really hated McFee, but he hated Pop. He shot several of our prize steers, when Pop was trying to improve our breed. Our men had a gun-fight with McFee's men over that and two or three were killed. That was in '59. Things died down, after that, somehow, and I went away. . . ."

Morgan said abruptly. "Whoever came here and stole your father's letter couldn't have been in town and engaged in the fight. But the two forces were working together. There are a hundred guerillas in those hills, Sam. Until they are cleaned out, you and every other rancher in this country are in danger."

"Where are your Texans?" demanded Sam. "I can ride. I know those hills; I grew up in them. If we had fifty men, or twenty-five good ones, I'd find your bandits!"

Morgan Reese said, "There's a fire in the stove. I'll build it up. We must eat."

"Where are your men?" cried Sam. "What kind of thing has been going on here!"

There was a tea kettle with hot water. Morgan made coffee, then poured water into a basin. He found soap and rinsed his beard thoroughly. Sam sat and stared as the suds formed, and Reese produced a razor.

There were scissors in a drawer. Morgan found them and began snipping. The blonde hair fell upon a towel. Morgan was very neat, very deliberate. The razor was sharp. In a few moments the man was denuded of his whiskers. He stood very quietly, enduring Sam's examination.

Sam said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

Morgan was quite handsome. He was about thirty-five, Sam could see, and his chin was square and firm. Morgan said, "You recognize me, now. Probably some of the others found out who I was. The Texans would not ride for me if they knew."

"You're a Yankee!" said Sam. "I remember you well! You left when the War broke out, to join the Union Army! Your name is—"

"Morgan Reese," said his companion. "I was known here as Bill Bacon, but Reese is my right name. I was graduated from West Point in '52."

"You're a spy! A Yankee spy!" Pop must have known, Sam thought excitedly. Pop had been irate at the sight of Morgan Reese.

"There will be trouble here, after the War," said Reese evenly. "You know that the South cannot win. It will be hell when the politicians of the North begin cutting up down here. There are men in the Union forces who see this coming and are trying to remedy it. I was here before

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the War as a spy; now I am here to help this part of the country when the real trouble comes."

Sam said, "They'll get you, if you go without those whiskers. They almost got you before you went away. You killed two men in escaping. They have brothers hereabouts—Sanders and Cochrane. I knew them well."

Morgan said, "Nevertheless, I'm going beardless into this fight. I am sure someone has already discovered me. It is quite possible that I will be killed. I came here on a mission which was dangerous—and now that the Texans have found me out, what is there to do but die?"

Sam said, "You tried to rally the county men against the guerillas? You thought you could organize them to protect themselves?"

"I was to instil a respect of Law into the county," said Morgan. "Then, when the end comes, they'll be ready. It will not be easy—I thought to make it bearable by cleaning out as much riffraff as possible."

Sam said, "I believe you, Morgan. Somehow, I know you are telling the truth. But the Texans will kill you. If we only had Pop's letter!" His leg ached, but it was a minor irritation. "The guerillas, or McFee, or both, killed my father, those two poor men out behind the corral. There are guns in a rack, in that other room, unless they took them. In the hills, you say? We're going into the hills tonight!"

"Two men against a hundred," said Morgan. He said it calculatingly, coolly, without fear, as though he were figuring the odds.

"Two soldiers, who know the hills," corrected Sam. "You're a Yankee, Morgan, but you must know how to fight a battle. There is plenty of darkness. . . . Look and see about those guns."

There was one of the new Spencers—trust Pop to have obtained one of the repeating rifles. There were Navy Colt's revolvers, such as the Confederate officers carried. There was ammunition to fit the weapons.

The raiders had not come into this small room. They must have worked very fast. Sam wondered why as he was busy with the guns.

The coffee boiled and Morgan said, "We must eat, for strength. There's a ham, I see." He was a very cool fellow, Sam thought. A very brave man, too, who would surely die when the fierce Secessionist Texans whom he had almost led were to catch up with him.

There were hoofbeats outside, and Sam took the Spencer and stood in the dark on one side of the open door. Morgan ducked for the fence with an old Sharps buffalo gun. It was a single rider, coming from the north, where the Box Jack was.

Sam's finger tightened on the trigger of the repeater, then slackened as his jaw dropped in surprise.

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THE girl was on a large dun, and she rode like a veteran, side-saddle, still in her green habit. She swept through the gate and the dun pranced and danced to a stop.

She called, "Mr. Poole! Sam Poole!"

He stood into the light and said, "Come in, Miss—McFee."

She dismounted and came towards him, her face very white in the reflection of the lamp. She said, "Not McFee. I'm Marion Poole."

"Poole?" He followed her into the room.

"My mother was a McFee," she said. "My father was Carter Poole. Do you know about Carter Poole?"

Morgan was standing in the doorway. He said gently, "Sam doesn't know, I am sure. And I haven't told him."

"Carter Poole was your father's brother," said the girl. "I—I'm sorry about your father. It—it was terrible. But he never would accept me. Uncle Val—"

Sam said, "Please, everybody, sit down, I'm unable to take this all in."

The girl sat gracefully on a chair and was very earnest. "My father deserted my mother when I was a baby. He was killed soon afterwards. He—was a drunkard. Val McFee shot him, Sam. I call you Sam, because you're my cousin and it would be very silly not to, don't you think so?"

She seemed really concerned about this, which would have been funny had not Sam's brain been reeling at such a rapid rate. "I told Mr. Reese about it—part of it—in Preston, before the—the shooting started. I didn't want you to take up the feud against Uncle Val, who has been good to me. He shot my father in self defense. He hated your father because of Carter—because he loved my mother. . . ."

Sam said, "Pop never did anyone any harm!"

"Uncle Val thought he should look after me," said the girl. "I was brought up in a boarding school. Uncle Val paid for it."

Morgan was looking quizzically at Sam. The girl said, "It's all very confused. But your father got killed, and now you have rifles and are going out. . . . Uncle Val did not kill your father!"

Sam said, "I am sure you believe all this. It would certainly account for the feud. But something is wrong. Pop left a letter—if we only had that letter!"

Morgan said, "Uncle Val does sound a trifle heroic. Pop should be allowed to tell his side of the story!"

"Uncle Val is good!" the girl cried. "You must stop this feuding!"

"Someone shot my father," Sam pointed out. "Morgan thinks we might be able to find him. We are going to look, and if Val McFee is there, he'll get what he deserves."

She stood up, her hands rigid at her sides. "You *are* bloodthirsty! Both of you! I tell you, this thing must stop."

The lamp was on the table, between them. Sam thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful as his red-headed cousin—his first cousin! For a moment he was sharply regretful, looking at her.

Morgan said sharply, "Duck, Sam! The light!"

Sam moved, standing on his good leg. He elbowed the lamp and dove forward, clutching. He tackled the girl, throwing her across the room.

Morgan was flat, the buffalo gun poked out over the still of the open door. The shot came whining in and lodged in the wall.

"Heard a stone roll," Morgan whispered. "He must be in the road, on an unshod horse." He fired into the night and the room shuddered to the concussion.

There was a slight drumming of hoofbeats and then silence. Sam said, "I won't relight that lamp. Cousin Marion, you'd better go home. It's not safe around here!"

She was trembling like a leaf. She said, "Who—who was it?"

"I'd like to know," said Sam. Morgan had gone outside and was prowling about. "I wish you would go home and stay out of harm's way. Tonight I am going to settle this thing."

"Tonight?" she said.

"The murderers have come to the Valley," he pointed out. "We know it now."

She said, "I—it's not right, Sam."

"Perhaps," he said. "But you must go."

He caught the dangling reins of the dun and showed her the back way. The moon was bright enough. He said, "Thank you for coming. I know you meant well. Tell your uncle he may look for me if he is guilty—and that I'll come shooting!"

He watched her ride away and again he was regretful that she was close blood kin. She was a fine, red-headed girl, a woman of spirit. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Night of Vengeance

SAM found some dark ranch clothing in a chest. He was horribly tired, but sleepless. He changed while Morgan made last minute preparations. His leg was almost numb and he would ride Clown, although it was dangerous to use the partly white horse in the night, when he could be easily distinguished. Clown knew him, and it would be difficult enough, riding over the hills.

He strove to remember the Sawmill, searching his mind for details. Jeb Crane had ridden with him, years ago, over every inch of the range. . . .

Jeb Crane! Sam buttoned the flannel shirt and limped into the other room. He said, "Morgan! Crane wanted to kill me right bad. I'll bet I know why!"

Morgan said, "Something you could remember?"

"Yes. In the Sawmill, north of our property, there is a peculiar dry gulch. It must have been a big river, one day. Now it's always dry, and very wide. There is a steep hill on each side. A small army could camp in it."

"Can we get there before morning?" asked Morgan.

"Easily," said Sam, "if we're not challenged."

"There'll be outposts," said Morgan. "If the Texans had only trusted me a little longer!"

"We might circle the place and come down from the north," said Sam. "It would take hard riding. I don't know if I could make it."

"We'll try," said Morgan. "You lead out."

They draped themselves with ammunition belts, hung their weapons in their belts and on the horses. Sam took a last look at the Bar Y ranch house and said, "I was raised here. I'll never come back until I get the murderer that killed Pop!"

Morgan said, "Come on, Sam. It's getting late."

They rode in a wide circle, over flat ground, then into the hills north of the dry gulch which Sam remembered. The night waned and Sam was filled with the poisons of exhaustion, but somehow he clung to the painted pony's back. The stars were bright and it was easy to keep the general directions in mind, but he was fuzzy-minded, he knew.

He kept thinking of Pop, and of the girl who so strangely turned out to be his cousin. It was not like Pop to conceal a thing of that sort. Pop had been loquacious, open-handed, kindly, generous. Sam had not even heard of Carter Poole, Pop's brother, except vaguely, as one long departed.

If Sam accepted the girl's story, it put Pop in a bad light and explained Val McFee's hostility. As Morgan said, Pop should be allowed to tell his side of it. If only that letter had not disappeared.

Then there was the queer business of Morgan Reese, who rode by Sam's side, silent in the night. He was a confessed Yankee spy and organizer. He had befriended Sam in Fort Smith. But in Preston, Morgan had been very slow, and Pop had been killed, and it had been obvious that Pop disliked Morgan.

Of course, the girl had hampered Morgan's movements in the gun-fight at the post store. And at least one of the murderers had gone down under Morgan's fire. Still—where were Morgan's vigilantes? Supposing they had discovered that their organizer was a Yankee? Would they just have disappeared?

Morgan was offering no comment. He had fallen into silence at the beginning of the ride. The two horses were strong and sure-footed as they struck into the hills.

There was a figure silhouetted at the top of a high knob. It disappeared almost at once. Sam reined in.

They dismounted, and Morgan said, "Probably a one-man sentinel on this end, because they fear little from this direction. Stay here. I'll get him."

Sam waited, holding the horses, realizing that his game leg made him useless in a stalking adventure. Morgan divested himself of ammunition belts and all weapons but a long Bowie knife before he crept away. It was a long, uneasy wait, but at last there were sounds of a scuffle. Then Morgan was back, grim-faced and pale in the starlight.

"I recognized the man," said Morgan tautly. "He was one of my vigilantes!"

Sam said, "I see!"

"I evidently recruited from among the guerillas," said Morgan bitterly. "No wonder my outfit has vanished!"

Sam said, "Across that line of shale and rock lies the gulch. We can walk from here with less danger of detection, and the horses will be safer here."

"Can you walk?" asked Morgan incredulously.

"I can crawl!" said Sam. "I've got to get to the gulch."

They went slowly, cautiously, climbing the ridge of land, skirting the hill where Morgan's victim lay weltering in a pool of blood. They came to the summit and stopped, looking down upon the scene spread before them.

The campfires were banked, but they shed some light. There were men sitting cross-legged, men stretched on bed rolls. There were men drinking coffee and men chatting together in groups, their voices low. Sam unlimbered the glasses he had brought back from the War and conned the encampment, searching for a familiar face.

He found many. He picked out the scamps, the drunkards, a few tinhorn gamblers, all the human refuse of the county which he had known as a youth. He saw others, some of whom he knew to be honest, who probably thought they were engaging in a patriotic adventure when they raided for beef, or cut down a man marked by their leaders as a Yankee sympathizer.

But there was no sign of a man who could be challenged as a leader. There was no Jeb Crane, no Val McFee, nor anyone of like calibre. Indeed, the band seemed waiting, and Sam saw that the horses off to one side were saddled.

Morgan whispered, "They're moving tonight."

"There must be sixty or seventy of them," said Sam. "We can't possibly handle this crew, Morgan. We need help."

"There is no help," said Morgan. "Half the men I thought were mine are down there."

"It's suicide to attack," muttered Tom. "With nothing gained, and nothing learned."

They crouched on the hilltop and watched, careful to keep themselves against lowering rock formation, so that they would not be spotted. They had found the guerilla camp, but Sam felt as helpless as ever.

Morgan clutched his arm and said, "Look!"

From the south a knot of riders came into the subdued light of the campfires. Then men crowded forward. A buzz of excitement came up to the two watchers upon a stiffening night breeze.

★

JEB CRANE was tall and swaggering, dropping from a giant black horse. The men fell back respectfully. Jeb's face was keener, sharper, and the quality of his leadership became immediately apparent and one of Sam's half-guesses was correct.

The red-headed man with the scar on his left cheek was in the party, and the two-gun fellow from Fort Smith. They sat their ponies, flanking Jeb, watchful

even of the company of guerillas. They were patently bodyguards.

The man who rode the bay horse was very still. His flat, hard face was expressionless. Sam said, "McFee!"

And then he saw the girl. She held her head high, but fear was in her. She was on the same horse which she had ridden to the Bar Y. She had been intercepted, Sam supposed, upon the road home.

Morgan said, "It's McFee, all right. But look at his hands!"

Sam swung the glasses upon his father's enemy. McFee's hands were bound? He was a prisoner.

Morgan said, "It looks like Jeb Crane is the king-pin. It looks like Val McFee has some right upon his side, after all."

"I don't understand it," muttered Sam.

"There are twenty men at the Box Jack!" said Morgan. "Jeb must have caught McFee going out to search for his niece. If we had those twenty men here!"

Jeb was saying something to the assemblage. They surged around, staring at McFee, eyeing the girl. Their attention was all upon the words of their leader. Morgan said, "The horses! There's no guard right now!"

He was on his feet as he spoke. He left his rifle at Sam's feet, carrying his revolvers, however, and the sharp Bowie. He said, "Cover me as best you can, Sam. This is the time!"

He was gone, down to the right, through the rocks which lay carelessly on the ridge. Sam held the Spencer ready, put Morgan's rifle handy to his reach. There was a rock the right height for a rest.

Down below, the girl was shrinking from the stares of the men. Val McFee, however, was expressionless as Jeb Crane harangued the men.

Morgan was swift afoot. Sam cursed the Yankee bullet which had caught him in the wheat field at Gettysburg. The guerilla band was giving every attention to Jeb's speech.

If only Morgan did not stumble. . . .

The horses were at the edge of the gulch. There was a clear road south. Probably the red-head and the two-gun chap would attempt to recapture them. Sam drew a bead on the red-head.

Jeb was waving his arms, trying to put over some idea. The men seemed reluctant, and one answered back in words that Sam could not distinguish. Jeb shouted, "It's got to be done! We ain't safe unless we hang traitors!"

That would refer to McFee, Sam supposed. Jeb wanted to make a public execution of his murder. Jeb was much smarter than Sam had ever imagined. He had been many years in the county and knew every man and every foot of territory in it. How easy for Jeb to maneuver a crew of raiders here and there to fine advantage.

Yet, there were reluctant men in the band. No rope was produced, no evidence of mob spirit aroused by Jeb's speech. The tall leader grew more vehement.

A horse whinnied. Two shots were fired in rapid succession and a mustang bolted down the ravine. Sam saw his man touch spurs to his horse, and he fired. Morgan was using both revolvers, frightening the animals. Sam cursed. He had missed when the redhead's horse shied. Sam fired again reluctantly, getting the horse in the head, this time, putting the red-head afoot.

The two-gun man had not ridden away. Jeb was wheeling for the black. The black steed bolted. Jeb snapped orders and men jumped for their rifles. From the south there came scattered shots, flailing the woods where Morgan retreated. The guards came in, swearing that no one had got past them. Jeb Crane pointed to the rocks behind which Sam hid, and then the game got really hot.

It was like infantry fire, concentrated upon a sniper's position. Sam moved again and again, but random bullets came uncomfortably close. Jeb was stalking

about. He had McFee and the girl on the ground and managed to keep too near to them, so that Sam could not get a free shot at him.

Morgan came, scrambling over loose shale, risking everything to recover his rifle and his position.

He panted, "Jeb wants to hang the man and ship the girl out of the country. Says the Box Jack and the Bar Y together would give them headquarters and control of the county. They're ambitious. They mean to take over the state, and return to the Texan Republic."

Sam said, "For Jeb Crane's profit!"

"Certainly," nodded Morgan. "He must have planned this for some time, Sam."

They were still above the enemy, still firing. They kept moving, twenty or thirty feet between them, so that it seemed there were several of them in the party. Jeb was ordering a charge up the slope, but the men seemed reluctant, preferring to seek what cover they could and shoot it out until daylight.

The girl managed to get near some brush, out of the light, but every time Sam fired he was afraid of a ricochet hitting her.

Jeb ignored the prisoners for a moment, trying to rally his men. Val McFee, short and squat, moved very slowly. The horse of the two-gun bodyguard of Crane was jumping about, reins trailing. The camp was in considerable confusion, and Morgan made a fine shot on one brave man who started up the hillside.

The two-gun fellow tried to get hold of his horse. McFee seemed to stumble, fell against the man. There was confusion for a moment, then the two-gun man fell down and McFee's hands seemed free, and he was reaching for the bridle.

The horse swung around. Two men leaped to stop McFee. Sam's Spencer cracked and Morgan took the other one. McFee scrambled into the saddle. Jeb crane knelt to fire, then desisted, rolling out of range as both Sam and Morgan let go at him. He stayed in the shadows then, calling his orders.

The two-gun fellow lay very still. There was a knife between his shoulder blades. McFee had hidden out a weapon on his captors, Sam saw. McFee had staunch cowboys at the Box Jack, an hour's ride away.

There were Bar Y men out on the range, but Sam had had no time to speak with them. If they knew about the guerillas, as they almost must, they would think them a patriotic band and would stay far away from the trouble, minding their cattle and their business.

Sam fired the Spencer as quickly as possible, reloaded it with seven shots, six in the magazine, one in the barrel. The rapid-fire gun, new to this country, was scaring off the bandits. They must think there were many in the hills against them, so bitter was the fire which Sam and Morgan poured into the gulch.

Yet they were rallying. So many men could not be completely stampeded by two, no matter how well concealed were the pair. Jeb was gradually regaining control over them. His hoarse voice could be heard between shots, giving orders. The guerillas began spreading out, climbing the precipitous sides of the gulch to north and south.

"We'll be flanked pretty soon," said Morgan. "And when they find there are only the two of us, they'll charge."

"McFee can't get back under two hours," said Sam.

They were silent, and Sam picked off one of the flankers, then sprayed lead at the spot where he hoped Jeb would be hiding. The fires were all out now, kicked to pieces by the guerillas under Jeb's direction, and there was still the girl to consider.

Morgan muttered, "We should be able to do something. It's so dark. . . ."

Tom said, "Morgan! We could go down there!"

Morgan fired at a moving figure and said coolly, "It means one of us has got to get killed. We'd have to be dumb, double-dyed shot with luck to get away with it."

"I can't risk shooting that girl by accident," said Sam stubbornly. He was about to add that she was his cousin, wasn't she? which would have been a lie by implication. She did not seem a cousin to him. She seemed a beautiful, red-headed stranger.

Morgan said, "You go straight down. They'll least expect that. I'll go around."

Sam said, "Right! It's been a good fight, Morgan."

They touched hands, passing each other in the dark. Sam reloaded the Spencer and carried it over his arm, ready. Morgan's hand had been dry and steady. The Yankee seemed entirely without fear, Sam thought wonderingly.

Sam was afraid. He was walking straight down a hill into the jaws of death, and although he had accepted the fact of death many times during the War, he was now afraid that he would be killed before he could get to Marion Poole. . . . Before he could avenge his father and learn the truth about many things which he was beginning, even in the heat of battle, to suspect.

CHAPTER FIVE

Marching Into Hell!

SAM had only the vaguest notion now of where the girl was located. He moved as steadily as he could, trying to appear as though he were not limping, but that the uneven ground was hampering him.

A man ahead snapped, "What you goin' back for? They're up there!"

"Just caught one," Sam said. "Nicked my leg. They're movin' east, pardner. Saw five of them sashayin' over on that peak."

"That's where Bob was," growled the man. "Bet they kilt Bob."

Sam grunted and went on. He passed two more men, and now he limped openly, realizing that it was an excuse to get to the rear. The shadows grew deeper in the gulch and he stopped and squatted, using his ears.

He heard Jeb's voice, but he dared not fire at the leader while in the enemy's midst. He started in that direction, remembering Morgan's Bowie, wishing he had a like weapon to sink into Jeb's anatomy. He came within twenty feet of the guerilla leader, heard him say:

"There can't be more'n a dozen of 'em!" Jeb said. "Get up in them hills and rake 'em out. That Sam Poole is shot with luck. I almost had him."

A voice answered, "You had better luck other times, Jeb. Don't beef your luck now."

That was the red-head with the scar. He seemed to be a trusted lieutenant. Sam crawled a little closer, and Jeb shot an order in his direction,

"G'wan over yonder, fool! You'll draw their fire. I don't want the gal killed, yet."

He chuckled and the red-head joined him. They were a couple of fine hombres, Sam thought bitterly. He got out of Jeb's sight, crawling in a circle. He found the bush and put out his hand.

Something wriggled away. Sam bent close and whispered, "Marion!"

"Sam!" she was weeping. "Sam! You came!"

"Morgan's around somewhere," Sam whispered. "Let me untie your hands, and we'll find him."

"You'll be killed!" she said.

"Maybe," said Sam. "Hold still. Now follow me. And keep a sharp look for Morgan."

They ran smack into a man who was

aiming his rifle at the hill, firing monotonously, reloading, firing again. There was so much of this indiscriminate firing that no one had noticed yet that it was not being returned.

Sam waited until the man's gun was empty, then jumped close and swung his revolver. He felt the bone smash under the swinging muzzle and for a moment he was slightly ill.

He said to Marion, "Over this way. Morgan was coming down through the flankers. They may have caught him. . . ."

Marion said, "I can shoot a gun, Sam."

There was a revolver upon the fallen man. Sam took it and handed it to the girl. He said, "Save one for yourself, if it goes badly. Morgan should be about here. . . ."

There was a pistol shot, very close. By its flare, Sam saw three men in a group, and then lead was flying and a great cry arose, "They're down among us! Look out, everybody!"

The very number of their enemies was an advantage, so far, Sam thought. He cut down on the three who were incautiously close together. He fired both revolvers, emptying them.

Morgan was down. Sam fell over him and then Marion came to them and the three huddled together. There was no further fire from the trio who had challenged Morgan, but men were running about and soon someone would make a light and they would be discovered. Jeb Crane was shouting for a fire.

Morgan said, "Same place you got it, Sam. We got two legs betwen us, now."

Sam said, "Marion! Get out of this. Get started towards your uncle's place. He'll be bringing men."

She said, "No!"

Morgan said, "I found a little place, over yonder—if we could make it. . . . A sort of cave."

Tom said, "Cave? Yes! On a ledge. On that hill. Only it's not a cave, it's just a depression in the hills. But we'd be out of sight for awhile."

Morgan got up, resting on one foot. The girl came close to him, and the three moved together. Jeb Crane was stalking about, now, reorganizing his men. Someone made a flare, stepping quickly out of the light of the burning brand. Slowly, a fire grew, with the guerillas retreating from its light as best they could, two score guns ready to fire at a strange figure. Outside an occasional wild shot, there was a cessation of the firing.

That, Sam knew was the worst thing that could happen. He pushed Marion and Morgan ahead. He said, "I know that spot. Get to it as quickly as you can!"

He hopped to a tree and stood behind its trunk, halfway up the hill. He leveled the Spencer at the shadowy figures just beyond reach of the fire's light. He pressed the trigger in slow, regular cadence. One, two three, four—

Men scattered, men fell. Rifles swung about. The tree trunk shook under the lead which poured into it. Sam's shirt was shredded. Only a miracle kept him from being hit. He ducked, keeping the tree between him and the men below, and sought a remembered path on the hillside.

They would make the hiding place, all right. The fire was all coming Sam's way, now. Marion and Morgan could lay up there and be concealed and perfectly safe so long as Sam stayed alive and kept firing to draw the guerillas his way.

It was a light-headed thing to do, the sort of thing Sam hated. It was self-sacrificial martyrdom and he was too practical minded to take emotional satisfaction from it. Even as he moved latitudinally upon the hill his mind sought a way out. To give his life in a Cause was one thing, but to sell it however dearly in the Sawmill, in his own back yard, to a renegade like Jeb Crane, was unpalatable.

He gained refuge behind a rock. They were really after him, now. He caught

one by the light of the fire and dropped him headlong, but there were others coming. He supposed Morgan and he had accounted for a dozen or more of them, but there were too many.

He wished Pop was here to help. Sam was getting weary—too weary. . . .

He got the Spencer ready once more. They were fanning out, and Jeb had remembered the declevity, too. Jeb was leading a band of them up that way. Jeb was growing fearful of losing his men, now. The burial squad would be busy tomorrow.

And Pop awaited burial, back in Preston. Sam's finger curled on the trigger of the gun. Right now he would pay off for Pop. Right now he would make sure that Marion had a chance, whether Pop had been wrong in that, or not. He did not believe that Pop had neglected his niece, but a man could not take a chance.

His first shot clipped a man in the head. That was too high, and he could not get a sight on Jeb in the uncertain light. He lowered his aim. They had stopped, now, and were aiming his way. He fired carefully, emptying the Spencer. Then he drew the two revolvers.

He was behind a rock, and the revolvers did not handle well from there. He called sharply,

"Jeb! Jeb Crane! Come and get me, Jeb, and let me have just one shot at you!"

★

MEN howled then, and red fire combed the night. The bullets sang an evil song about Sam's ears. He went forward, limping, but implacable, seeking Jeb Crane. He saw the red-head swing up a big Colt's and took a pot shot. The red-head clasped both hands on his belt buckle and fell forward like an old carpet bag.

There was no sight of Crane. The others fired, and Sam felt a leaden finger poke at his shoulder. He aimed at the source of the steadiest fire and threw a pair of bullets into darkness.

Then a rifle was crashing nearby and the smaller crackle of pistol fire joined in. The charge broke, the guerillas fell back, running. Jeb Crane tried to rally his men. Sam got out into the open then. He said, "Here I am, Jeb!"

The tall man turned, and in one motion fired and threw himself sideways. That was an old trick, and something in Sam's memory betrayed it. He swiveled his right hand gun, touching the trigger.

Jeb Crane seemed to leap straight in the air. Then he came down, all asprawl, and a man shouted, "They got Jeb!"

There was panic in that cry. Sam loosed the remaining shots in his revolvers and leaned against a tree trunk.

Marion found him there and led him, half-dazed, to the cave.

Morgan said, "That was a crazy thing to do. But it worked."

Sam said, "I didn't think it out. I was lucky." His shoulder was numb and blood ran down upon his hand.

The horses came in, then. They came in from the south, a score of them, flying furiously, the stones shooting sparks from their iron shoes. Val McFee came in, firing as he came, a gleam in his hard eyes.

Guerillas fled in all directions. In ten minutes there was no sign of them and McFee's Box Jack crew were combing the hills for stragglers.

Tom and Morgan and the girl rested beside the replenished fire. McFee said in his harsh voice, "The boys were already headin' this way. I met them."

Sam said, "Here's your niece. She's all right."

Morgan was silent. McFee looked at him, then at Sam. McFee said, "Before God, Sam, I didn't kill Pop. Jeb got him from a window over the bank down the street. There were big men behind Jeb Crane. This was a big plot."

Sam said, "Get Jeb's body. There should be a letter."

They found it in Jeb's pocket. It started, "Son Sam," and Morgan read it to them:

"If you get to read this, I'll probably be dead. But don't blame Val McFee. Him and me got into it over Carter, and Carter never was worth it. But Val felt bad, on account of his sister. Val killed Carter in a fair fight, Sam.

"I never liked Val, but it would have been straightened out if Jeb Crane hadn't stirred up trouble at every turn. Jeb shot my steers and laid it to Val. Then he burned Val's barn and laid it to me. I just discovered that Jeb's got a gang in the hills and something big is afoot. I'm going to look into it at the bank, in Preston, where I fear something is rotten.

"If Carter's little girl had lived, maybe things would have been different, and we could have got together and stopped Jeb Crane. But she died, and Val's sister died, and things drifted. I'm sorry, and I know Val's got a right to be bitter. Don't keep up the feud, son. Try to straighten it out with Val. Luck, son!—Your Pop."

"P.S. I don't even know whether Val is aware of it, but Carter wasn't my real brother. He was adopted, and the poor boy never amounted to much."

Morgan stopped reading. Sam said, "So. You're not my cousin, Marion!"

McFee was silent. Morgan shifted his wounded leg. The girl was weeping softly. Sam went on, "I'll do anything I can to straighten it out, Val. I'm sorry. You see, Pop was innocent. If he could have talked quietly with you—but Jeb kept stirring up trouble."

Val McFee said, "You run the Bar Y, Sam. We'll get along. We'll do much better, running together."

"We'll need all the unity we can manage," said Sam, looking at Morgan. He could not say anything to McFee about Morgan. The Texas men would still have to be convinced about the Yankee.

Then they could run the ranch. Sam did not feel that he could get along very well without Morgan, now.

He reached out and touched the girl. He was very weary. Her hand clutched his, held tight. That was good. . . .

THE END

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CHAPTER ONE

"Not Against Guns Like Yours!"

IT WAS late afternoon when Miles Granberry crossed the dry bed of Santisima Creek. Silence lay deep upon the surrounding hills, and from some remote point Miles picked up the sound of a gunshot.

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He sat listening for a while, then spoke to his horse and took a trail which veered away from the north bank of the creek.

In half an hour he came to a deserted cabin and went on some hundred yards to the shelter of a juniper thicket. There he dismounted and waited.

Twilight passed and shadows gathered

darkly. A shod hoof clicked against stone, followed by other sounds of a rider approaching the cabin. Presently flames from an open fireplace lifted an unsteady light against one of the windows. Miles walked down the slope.

He said "Jonas," and without waiting for a reply, pushed open the cabin door and stepped inside.

Jonas Quade, standing at the fireplace, swung about, his hand darting to his holster. Then he grinned and relaxed.

"Wasn't expecting you 'fore morning," he said.

"Captain Aravaca met me in Nogales," Miles explained.

"The rifles were all right; the Mex paid off, huh?"

Miles nodded. "In American banknotes."

Quade's glance showed greed and impatience. He picked up the door bar and fitted it in place. Thereupon Miles took off a money belt and put it on the table. Quade opened the flaps and fingered the crisp currency.

"Gun-runners," he observed, "face lots of onpleasant things, but cutting a swag like this ain't one of 'em!"

Miles squatted at the edge of the fireplace, filling his pipe. "Where's Charley?" he asked.

Quade stepped over and spat in the fire. "Me and you and Charley have rode some tough trails together. This is the first real money we've made in quite a spell." He drew a slow, deep breath.

Miles lit his pipe and a silence built up. The coffee in the pot Quade had placed before the fire began to boil.

"There was some gun-trouble in Tucson," Quade continued. "We'll have to split the six thousand two ways, Miles. Charley won't be here tonight, or any other time."

Miles showed neither surprise nor concern. He stood up, puffing at his pipe.

His taciturnity disturbed Quade. "You don't think I'm lying—you believe Charley's dead, don't you?"

"Yes," Miles told him. "I believe he's dead."

Quade had brought in a mess-kit and the two men prepared and ate a frugal meal. Miles counted out three thousand dollars to Quade, moved toward the door with obvious intent.

Quade's face showed a peculiar quality of amazement. "You ain't sleeping here tonight? What the hell's the matter?"

"I want to be in Tucson early in the morning," said Miles.

Anger moved wickedly across Quade's features; his arm lifted, bent at the elbow. He said, "Damn your suspicious soul!"

Miles' faint, mirthless smile stopped Quade, holding his hand in that incomplete move.

Miles backed out the door and closed it, walked up to the juniper thicket and got his horse. There was grained into him a distrust of men and their motives, and he made a circuitous way around the cabin and back to the trail.

Presently he recrossed Santisima Creek and rode up to a sparsely grassed mesa. He gathered brush and built a fire, thereafter busying himself with the arrangement of his saddle and blanket roll.

A wind stirred through the hills and the fire sent out a crackle of flames; somewhere in the shadows the horse ripped off grass tops. Later, the wind died and the fire burned down to a bed of coals . . . .

★

INTO this midnight silence moved a furtive shape, creeping up to the fire yard by yard. A twig snapped and that dark figure was still for a while. But there was no movement among Miles' blankets and the figure crawled closer. A coal flared up and the gun in the marauder's hands threw out its blast and muzzle flame.

The intruder leaped up and ran past the fire—stopped, suddenly warned by the absolute stillness of the shape beneath those bullet-torn blankets. He made one harsh sound like the snarl of a trapped beast, then kicked the blankets aside, exposing mesquite branches which had been placed there in the form of a human body.

From the darkness, Miles Granberry said, "Drop your gun, Jonas."

Quade whirled and fired from the hip and the flat crash of Miles' revolver answered. Quade spun around. His weapon clattered against the rocky soil. He took three or four steps, each more unsteady than the other.

He said, "Charley planned for us to kill you and split the money two ways. That gave me an idea of—of how to get it all for myself." Then he stumbled and fell.

Miles walked up to the fire and looked at Quade; saw that he was dead. He found Quade's wallet and transferred the three thousand dollars to his own money belt. He stood there a moment, recalling how Quade had been in the days when they had ridden together and called each other friend, these thoughts stirring up no pity and no regret.

That interval of reflection, then Miles walked to his saddle and pushed aside the broken mesquite branches; lay down and pulled up the blankets and went to sleep.

He was up at dawn. He found a narrow ravine and scooped out its sandy bottom. There he buried Quade, covering the shallow grave with stones. After that, he boiled his morning coffee and rode away without a backward glance.

At the first fork of the trail he judged the direction of the shot he had heard the afternoon before and turned southward. Soon low-flying buzzards verified his calculations, and in the next valley he found what remained of Charley Bateman.

He gave attention to the bullet hole in the back of Bateman's skull, weighed that against how Jonas Quade had said, "There was gun trouble in Tucson," then went about the grim business of digging his second grave of the day.

The burial finished, Miles stood watching the sun put its increasing heat upon the hills. It had been a long time since he had thought of home, but now he brought that little East Texas town to mind . . . .

He remembered leaving there and going up to Kansas to work on the new railroad; remembered coming back, and how his mother had said, "I hope you'll stay. You've saved your wages; you can enlarge the store."

"Spend my life behind a counter," he asked impatiently, "dishing out flour and salt pork and molasses? Not me."

"This store would make you a good, honest living," his mother had told him. "There's a great future here. The old wild days are over. You could be prosperous and happy and could have a nice home. That's what all men want, son—sooner or later."

"Others have gone to the Territory and you were not against it."

She said gently, "You are not like the others. Your father was that way, Miles. He would have come to a bad end if responsibilities had not seasoned him. That's why I hoped you'd find some nice girl, and—"

"I had a girl," he interrupted, "who promised to wait for me, but I come back and find her already married to Tom Barfield."

"Kate isn't the only one; in a year or two you will remember her only as a girl who fell in love with Tom Barfield."

"I figure Tom's inheriting the B Square had a lot to do with her changing," he said scornfully. "Money, land, cattle—those are the things people love."

"Already you're bitter and cynical," his mother told him. "If you leave here, you'll wander into dark, lonely trails. Trouble will come to you and you won't try to

avoid it; finally every man's hand will be against you."

Miles, thinking back, marveled at the accuracy of her predictions. He had forgotten Kate. He had ridden dark trails. Trouble had been first his companion, then his master. Now, in one morning, he had buried the only two men who called him friend—buried them on the day they had planned to bury him!

He went to his horse and, riding away, said aloud, "Money is man's only real friend. With it he has everything; without it, nothing."

At noon he came to where the trail he followed intersected another. "To hell with this country," he decided, and turned his horse eastward.

Thus he came to Raider's Gap at sunset and sold his horse at Greer's barn.

"Where," he asked Sam Greer, "does the next stage go?"

"Mesa Norte," Greer replied, "at five in the morning."

"Thanks," said Miles, and walked down to Brandon's Hotel.

★

HE WAS standing on the hotel porch the next morning when the stage pulled up from the barn. Ike Feldman sat on the box and Tom Wilkins rode guard. A drummer fussed around, seeing about his trunk. A heavy-shouldered man in dark broadcloth and a beaver hat came out to the porch.

"A little cool," he remarked.

Miles made no reply and the man went down the steps and entered the coach. The drummer followed, and presently Miles joined these two. A rancher and his wife came in and sat beside the drummer; a gaunt, gray-haired man and a girl hurried out from the hotel.

The girl was tall and there was in her the lithe grace of youth. Her dark grown was of modish cut; its high collar accentuated the fairness of her skin. Beneath a small, plumed hat her hair showed yellow as gold.

The drummer stood up. "Maybe you'd like to sit by the other lady."

She said, "Thank you," and took that place.

The man who followed her sat beside Miles. The stage rolled out of town and the man in the beaver hat said, "My name's Hayes, Howard Hayes."

"I'm Will Townes," the gray-haired man replied. "The young lady is my daughter, Leslie Townes."

The rancher and his wife made themselves known and the drummer tipped his derby, said, "I'm Lucius Kinney."

Afterwards there was an interval of silence, these people giving Miles that opportunity to speak. But he looked out the window and said nothing.

The stage trail lay through the stony hills and valleys of a country that was sun-baked and bare except for chollas and saguaros and an occasional palo verde's splash of color.

Inside the coach, talk moved aimlessly. The rancher's wife, a small, meek woman, told Leslie, "This is a trip we've been planning twelve years: a visit with our daughter in El Paso. We ain't seen her since she married and left home. We was lucky to have some good friends we could trust to look after our place."

Those words touched against Miles' mind and called up a memory of Charley Bateman, who had ridden with Jonas Quade and called him friend, and who had died because he trusted Jonas.

He put these bitter thoughts aside, listened idly to Howard Hayes talk of the California gold country.

"I remember Shale Gulch when it wasn't nothing but a creek and a few low hills. Then almost overnight, it was a town." Hayes' voice ran on, telling of Shale Gulch: its busy days and boisterous nights.

"I made my pile there," he confided,

"and now I'm heading east for my old home in Virginia—yessir, going to sit around the plantation and take it easy the rest of my life."

During all this, Miles now and then felt the weight of a glance. He turned and caught a brief part of that glance, then Leslie Townes looked down at her folded hands, color lifting to her cheeks.

They made Cantrivas Station by noon, there changed horses, ate a hurried meal and rolled on.

The stage now took to higher hills and Miles sensed in Howard Hayes a peculiar tension: a sort of waiting for something that was beyond the knowledge of the others.

Suddenly Ike Feldman yelled, "Whoa!" and pulled his horses to an abrupt stop. There was a loud, gruff command, "That's it driver—stand 'er up!"

Hayes' hand slipped beneath his coat. "This is a hold-up, folks. Don't try—"

The sentence ended there, for Miles pushed a gun left-handed back of Will Townes and jabbed it against Hayes' side, so quick and ready that Hayes' was caught flat-footed.

Outside, Tom Wilkins spoke profanely and one of the highwaymen said, "Drop that gun or—"

A revolver cracked and Wilkins toppled off the box, his body making a dull thud.

A handkerchief-masked man opened the coach door and winked at Hayes, his view of Miles' revolver obstructed by Townes' body. "Get 'em moving, Howard; make 'em come out with their hands up."

The drummer went first and the others followed, Leslie Townes quiet and unafraid.

Miles jerked Hayes erect and pushed him to the door. There were four of the highwaymen and Miles, with one of his guns against Hayes' back and the other lifted above Hayes' shoulder, held them at that marked disadvantage.

"This man you planted among the passengers," he said, "talked too much. He's never been to Shale Gulch and Virginians don't roll their R's." He paused. "What I have I keep—nobody's taking anything away from me without a fight!"

The outlaws started to fan out, then the leader said, "Wait," and stared at Miles quizzically. "Your name's Granberry, ain't it?"

★

THAT voice stirred a memory in Miles' mind. He looked at the man closely, saw a mark of white hairs through his left eyebrow and the memory became less vague.

"That's right," he admitted.

"We don't want to buck no guns of yours," the leader said. "Don't bother us and we won't bother you—or nothing you've got."

Miles felt the silent appeal of the other passengers; felt LeslieTownes' glance fly to him, bright and sure.

He ignored that and said, "You've made a deal, mister."

Will Townes' shoulders sagged when the bandits took his money belt; Miles heard Leslie's cry of compassion. The rancher wore a gun and, emboldened by Miles' stand, he began to back away, lowering his right hand.

He yanked at his gun and the bandit leader shot him. Bullet-shock loosened his muscles and his arms dropped and hung straight down. He staggered and stood there, swaying a little as his wife's wail rose shrill and terrified.

Leslie appealed to Miles. "Please—please don't let them kill him."

The bandit leader said, "Keep out of this, Granberry," then paused, suddenly hesitant at some change that faintly colored the blankness of Miles' stare.

There lay between these two an unasked and an unanswered question—lightly hung and sharply dangerous—a deadlock ab-

ruptly broken when the rancher quietly crumpled to the ground.

The bandit leader glanced up at Ike Feldman. "Throw down the box, driver . . . . All right, boys, let's go."

Miles eased the pressure of the gun against Hayes' back. "Start walking, and don't look back."

The others rushed to help the rancher, but Miles stood apart, allowing nothing to divert his attention.

Hayes went about thirty yards, whirled and yanked a Colt from his shoulder holster. But Miles was alert and ready. His first shot struck Hayes squarely and he died like that, slowly sinking to the dust.

The retreating highwaymen stopped. Completely unperturbed, Miles went forward three or four paces. "Anything you fellows want to do about it?"

The bandit leader said, "Hayes' fault," and nodded to his men. They disappeared over the rise and presently the hoofbeats of their horses sounded, then faded away.

The rancher was trying to sit up. He was pale and sick, but Miles saw that he was not badly hurt. Will Townes and the drummer picked him up and carried him inside the coach. His wife, now softly crying, sat in one corner and held his head in her lap.

These people looked at Miles and he felt the brittle contempt of their glances.

Coldly indifferent, he closed the coach door and climbed up to the guard's seat.

CHAPTER TWO

Boss of Bushwhack Town

THEY came into Mesa Norte just before sunset. People sensing something wrong gathered about the stage. Miles climbed down and watched men lift the rancher out of the coach; one said, "I'll get Doc Kelly and bring him up here."

The drummer passed into the hotel without a word, and Will Townes gave Miles a cold stare. Leslie stopped.

"You could have kept them from hurting him," she said bitterly.

Miles said distantly, "A man has to take care of himself; nobody is going to do it for him."

"You're a monster," she told him stormily. "A cold-blooded monster."

He said, "You're entitled to your opinion, ma'am," and lifted his hat with grave courtesy.

Presently he entered the hotel, washed up and waited for supper. Big, blustery Sheriff Campbell was talking to Townes and Feldman. Leslie came in and now that she wore no hat, Miles saw the full yellow sheen of her hair.

"They shot the rancher, but didn't take his money," Townes told the sheriff. "They almost forgot to have Ike throw down the box. It was me they were after and I know—"

"I wouldn't go accusing anybody, Will," the sheriff interrupted with a strange uneasiness, "unless I could prove it." He turned and came across the room to Miles.

"You were in the hold-up, but wouldn't give up your guns or wallet. One of the bandits knew you and you made no move against 'em, even when they killed one man and wounded another. There's some talk, mister, that maybe you was in on the deal."

Miles said smoothly, "I never cared about talk—from sheriffs or anybody else! I looked after my own business during the hold-up and I'll look after it here."

Campbell's eyes widened and shifted away from Miles' flat, uncompromising stare.

"Be around in case I call you," he said, and immediately left the hotel.

An iron triangle whanged out the supper call. In the dining room, Miles selected a table in the far corner. Once he looked up and found Leslie staring at him.

Her chin lifted when their glances met, but he held her stare gravely and without boldness, and presently she looked down at her plate again.

Supper finished, Miles lit his pipe and walked along the main street of Mesa Norte. He moved with the idleness of one who has time to kill, yet he lay a close inspection upon the town and some intuitive wisdom in him picked up an undercurrent of unrest and dissension.

The most imposing structure on the street was the Big Rock Saloon, a stone building of two stories. From its doors came piano music, talk and boisterous laughter and the scrape of dancing feet.

Miles went inside and ordered a drink. A girl in an exaggerated miner's garb—the pants cut short to reveal shapely legs, the red silk blouse unbuttoned almost to the waist line—came out to the piano and sang:

"In a cabin in a canyon,
Excavating for a mine,
Lived a miner, Forty-Niner,
And his daughter Clementine."

Miles' attention touched the singer, veered swiftly away when he saw the bandit with the white eyebrow standing at the yonder end of the bar. There came to him now an instant knowledge of the man's name: Wyatt Kane.

He remembered Kane in Montana, and how a man there had said, "These holdups and murders won't stop until somebody kills Wyatt Kane or runs him out of town."

Kane came along the bar. "Howdy, Granberry." He chuckled and a wicked light rippled across his eyes. "Been a long time since I've seen you."

"A good while," said Miles remotely.

Kane laughed at this secret joke. He slapped the bar. "Here, bar-keep."

They had their drinks and Miles put a coin on the bar.

Kane pushed the money aside. "I'll do the buying."

Miles shook his head. "I never put myself beholden to a man, for drinks or anything else."

Kane's grin faded. "You ain't changed much, have you?"

"Men don't change," said Miles, "except to get worse."

Kane shrugged and let that pass. "There's a job in this town for you if you want it. Come on and meet the boss of Mesa Norte."

They walked back to a private office and entered.

Kane closed the door. "Boss, this is Granberry. Miles, meet Mister Hack Sherman."

The owner of the Big Rock sat at his desk. His dark hair was parted in the center; his skin had the pallor of one who is seldom in the sun. From each lower pocket of his fancy vest protruded the but of a silver mounted derringer. In his loosely-knotted black tie was an enormous diamond stick-pin.

He nodded toward a chair. "We saw you get off the stage. Been talking about you."

Miles sat down and said nothing.

Sherman waited a minute. "Kane says he used to know you. Up in Montana."

"That's right."

Sherman's almost colorless eyes regarded Miles with complete lack of expression.

"Kane," he said, "has been with me several months. Has made a lot of money."

Miles said, "I see."

"I could use you, too. Think it over."

Miles stood up. "I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Good. My friends drink on the house. Have one as you leave."

"If I work for you it will be for money," Miles said coldly, "and not for friendship."

He left the Big Rock and walked up to the hotel. In his room, he stretched across the bed and presently found himself thinking of Leslie Townes: of all her words and gesture and changes of expression.

★

AT ELEVEN o'clock the next morning he walked through the Big Rock and knocked at the door of Hack Sherman's office.

Sherman said, "Come in. Have a chair. You've come to work. That's fine. Pay will be a hundred a month and keep. Bonuses for special jobs."

Wyatt Kane opened the door. "Old man Townes is out here, Boss."

Miles started to get up, but Sherman said, "What I have to say to Townes is no secret."

Will Townes' features showed the strain of a sleepless night.

"I've come to see about the note. It's due tomorrow and I can't pay it."

Sherman regarded him bleakly. "You promised me you'd get the money. That's why you went to Julesburg."

Miles saw Townes go tight as a fiddle-string. "You know damn' well I got it and lost it in the hold-up."

"Maybe you did," Sherman agreed, "but that didn't pay me anything."

His blandness broke Townes' temper. "I'm not so sure of that. You tried to buy my place and when I wouldn't sell, you bought one of my secured notes and demanded payment. You knew that I was bringing the money back from Julesburg. That puts the robbery mighty close to your bunch of hoodlums."

"Talk gets men into trouble," Sherman interposed. "John Halcomb talked too much. Remember?"

"Yes," Townes retorted. "You had him shot down like a dog. And Sheriff Campbell, scared to death of you because you control the election machinery, said it was a fair fight. Halcomb, who couldn't hit a jackass in the rump with a tin tub, against a gun-hawk like Wyatt Kane! . . . Fair fight, hell!"

Sherman said, "All that don't help your case. I hold a five thousand dollar mortgage on your ranch. It's due tomorrow. I'm busy. Get out."

Townes' anger burned to a bright flame. He put one foot forward, his right arm bent and lifted his hand a few inches.

Sherman smiled. "If anything happened to you, your daughter would be a homeless orphan. This country isn't good to orphans."

Townes' arm relaxed. He made a slow turn, looked at Kane lounging in the doorway; at Miles, so still and remote in his chair by the window. He drew a tired, dejected breath and walked across the room. Kane stepped aside and let him pass.

"Go to the courthouse," Sherman told Kane, "and tell Sheriff Campbell to come over here."

Kane left, and Sherman looked at Miles. "We were talking about your duties. You are to—"

"You're a head of the hounds," Miles interrupted. "I haven't taken the job yet."

A flicker of annoyance touched Sherman's features. "My talk with Townes have anything to do with you deciding against it?"

"I haven't decided against it. I'm just thinking it over."

"You've had plenty of time. Take it or leave it."

Miles got up and started toward the door.

"Wait," said Sherman. "There's no place for a gun-slinger here unless he works for me. Leave town no later than tomorrow. Close the door as you go out."

Miles reached over and took a cigar from Sherman's box. He lit it and blew a cloud of smoke across the desk.

"A man's not beholden for what he *takes,*" he said and went out the office door, leaving it open.

He shouldered through the outer batwings and walked down to the barn at the end of the street. A freckled-faced boy was on duty and Miles inquired the way to Will Townes' ranch; later he rented a horse from the boy and rode out.

Going along at a lope, he found himself wondering if Leslie Townes would be at home and what would happen to her after Sherman foreclosed his mortgage. Impatiently he dismissed these thoughts and fell to considering Sherman's anxiousness to secure Townes' land, reasoning that the place must have some exceptional or perhaps hidden value.

The trail he followed went up through Dragoon Pass and he stopped there, looking down upon the startling contrast of the two valleys which lay before him.

To the left was Salvation Valley, green with planted crops. Houses were scattered along its floor and willows marked the winding way of Torquilita Creek. Roads led from one house to another, these finally converging upon a point where stood a small church.

To the right was Sand Basin, a desolate stretch of mesquite and greasewood and cacti. As far as the eye could see there was no sign of life or habitation.

At the end of the green valley, according to the boy at the stable, was the homestead of Will Townes. The lower section, where the house was, was in fields of alfalfa and winter wheat, but the upper part extended back into the rocky foothills. It was from there that Torquilita Creek came tumbling down to begin its more leisurely course along the valley.

Avoiding the house, Miles pulled away from the trail and rode through the hills. Presently he came to a mammoth spring, a place where waters seeping down from the hig Catalinas came gushing from a rocky cavern.

Miles saw that this was the source of Torquilita Creek and in a flash there came to him an understanding of what Hack Sherman wanted with Townes' ranch.

From this point, a dip ran all the way to Sand Basin, its beginning a deep arroyo which was separated from the spring by a wall of rock not more than ten feet tall and less than a hundred yards wide.

Miles had a vision of a canal dynamited through that rock; saw the spring's overflow go tumbling down to the dry, barren acres of Sand Basin. He saw irrigation ditches branch out from that channel; saw growing crops spring up where now there was nothing except cacti and scrub mesquite.

On the other hand, he realized the ruin and desolation this would bring to Salvation Valley and to its people. Coldly he put that thought aside.

"There's a fortune to be made here," he told himself. "That's all I need to worry about."

He mounted and rode toward Will Townes' house without any doubts in his mind about who owned Sand Basin.

Leslie came out to meet him. Without any greeting, she said, "I hardly expected you to come here."

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"I want to see your father," he said.

She turned away. "I'll tell him. Come up to the porch if you wish."

"I never like people more than they like me," Miles replied. "I'll wait here."

★

WHEN Will Townes came out he had a shotgun in his hands. "This ranch is mine until tomorrow," he said, "and there's no room for any of Hack Sherman's men."

Miles sat still. "I'm not working for Sherman. I came to make you an offer which may save most of your land."

"It's some sort of a scheme," Townes said, "but let's have it."

"How many acres do you own in the hills, south of the last planted field?"

Townes considered that. "About two hundred."

Miles lit his pipe. "I'll give you five thousand dollars for that two hundred acres."

"Sherman sent you; it's a trick."

"Sherman gets the whole place tomorrow anyhow," Miles said patiently. "Why should he buy a part of it today?"

Townes shook his head slowly. "That land's rocky and steep; it ain't worth five *hundred* dollars. What do you want with it?"

"That's my business," said Miles flatly. "Ride in to Mesa Norte and I'll pay you in cash. Then you can pay Sherman, make me a deed and save the best part of your ranch."

Townes was still puzzled, but he said. "I'll do it," and returned to the house.

Presently Leslie came out to the yard, smiling. "Father told me about your wonderful offer. I have misjudged you; nobody could make us so happy and be very bad." Her voice softened. "Father could not bring himself to sell this place because mother loved it so much. She's buried out there under the cottonwoods. The thought of leaving was so terrible, and now that I know we won't have to go . . . ."

Her voice broke and tears came spilling down her cheeks. She said, "I'm—I'm very foolish," and walked back to the porch. She sat on the steps and now and then she lifted her finger tips and pressed the tears away from her eyes.

Miles could not remember when he had seen a woman cry like that. Something he had considered dead past all revival stirred and made its demands on him, led him to a slow, reluctant march across the yard.

"I was rude when I first rode up," he said with a gentleness that was awkward. "I'm sorry."

She raised her face and a tremulous smile came through her tears. "I was rude, too. Forgive me. When you come to live on the land you're buying, I hope you'll find us good neighbors and good friends."

That jerked Miles back to reality. He said, "We'll never be friends—and I regret that."

He wheeled away to his horse, wondering why he had spoken those last four words and feeling much disturbed when he realized how true they were.

Leslie got up and went inside the house and in a moment her father rode up from the corral.

Townes was affable enough on the trip to Mesa Norte, yet there was in him a deep distrust of Miles and a sharp memory of the stage robbery. This lay between them and Miles made no effort to dispel it.

In town, they went immediately to the county registrar's office. Miles gave a coin to a Mexican boy and sent him to the Big Rock to get Hack Sherman.

Townes engaged the registrar in a conversation of crops and weather and Miles stepped into the office vault and counted out five thousand dollars from his money belt. He took this to Townes, then placed a chair against the wall and sat there.

Hack Sherman paused in the doorway, looking at Miles and Townes and putting a shrewd evaluation upon their being together.

"I've got the money to pay the note," Townes told him.

For a moment consternation and rage had their way with Sherman. He shot a wicked glance at Miles, then came to the desk slowly, lighting a cigar while he got himself in hand.

Townes gave him the money and the registrar opened a ledger, wrote a cancellation across the recording of the mortgage and Sherman signed it.

He put aside the pen and looked at Miles. "I hear you're leaving Mesa Norte tomorrow."

"No," Miles replied. "I'm sticking around. I've bought a part of Townes' ranch—the part that runs back into the hills."

Sherman grunted, then smiled evilly. "That's fine. I'm glad you're staying. Mighty glad!"

★

HE WENT out the door and the registrar drew up a deed to the land. After it was signed and recorded, Miles and Townes walked out to the court house porch.

Townes said, "I was suspicious of you, but you have dealt fair with me. You've done me a great favor and from now on I'm your friend. Anything I've got is yours; my house is open to you, day or night."

He held out his hand and Miles took it clumsily. It had been a long time since he had shaken hands with a man, and Townes' unmistakable sincerity awoke in him a sharp sense of loss. He thought of what would happen to Townes' planted acres after the creek was changed, and he quickly withdrew his hand.

After Townes had ridden away, Miles went back to the registrar's little office.

"Who owns the narrow, desert-like valley that lies to the right of Dragoon Pass?" he inquired.

"That's Sand Basin," the registrar replied. "It belongs to Hack Sherman. Never could figger what Sherman wanted with such a God-forsaken place."

Miles said, "Thanks," and left the court house.

He had dinner at the hotel and later sat on the porch, smoking. Presently Sherman came up from toward the Big Rock and took the chair next to Miles.

"I'll give you ten thousand for the land you bought from Townes."

Miles shrugged. "Not interested."

"Ten thousand is a lot of money. The world is a big, exciting place. A dead man or a poor one don't have much fun."

"Still not interested," Miles told him.

Sherman said, "Your business," and walked unhurriedly down the steps and along the street.

Miles went to his room and sat by the front window, long experience laying out a pattern of how this play was going to be staged. He smiled thinly when Wyatt Kane presently came strolling along and stopped to join a group of men talking in front of Laymon's Hardware.

Miles got up and went down the back stairs of the hotel, entered the rear of the hardware store, passed through and stepped out to the street not twenty feet from where Kane stood.

Kane was talking to the other men and at the same time keeping a watchful eye upon the hotel. He felt Miles' presence and made a slow, careful turn.

"Sherman won't like it," Miles told him, "if you fool around and waste time."

Pride was strong in Wyatt Kane; wildness burned in his eyes like a hot, tawny light. Yet Miles' gaze, so cool and remote, turned him hesitant and held him just as he was.

Miles' words pushed at Kane, deliberate

and provocative. "You're still yellow, Wyatt. You didn't like daylight shooting in Montana and you don't like it now."

Kane shook his head like a man deeply regretful. He said, "All right, Granberry," made his turn and went away.

The horse Miles had rented was at the court house hitchrack and he walked there, lifted the reins and led the animal down to the feed barn. Later, he strolled back along the street, watchful and making a veteran's choice and avoidance of certain places.

After supper, he sat in the hotel lobby and at nine o'clock he got up and walked the full length of the main street. There he slipped into the shadows and waited for the news of his appearance to find its way into the Big Rock.

Lamp-light laced across most of the street, but in that block where stood Flo Damon's big house with its drawn shades and open secrets, there was an unrelieved stretch of blackness. It was to this block that Miles gave his closest attention when he started back up the street.

He walked unhurriedly, all his senses keenly attuned to the night and when, from almost directly in front of Flo Damon's house, a revolver threw out a sudden blast, he instantly crouched close to the dust.

CHAPTER THREE

"A Little Bad Luck"

INSTEAD of returning the shot, he lay a skilled reckoning upon the scene; found in it one almost sure advantage and waited for that.

Again the gun blasted and Miles knew that the man across the street was hoping for an answering shot to direct his fire, and therefore he refused to be tempted.

And then the break Miles had waited for came.

Inside Flo's house a window shade went up and a shrill feminine voice asked, "What the hell's all the shooting?"

Light from that window outlined the form of Miles' assailant and Miles lined his sights to that dark shape and fired. The man let out a choking gasp and fell. The window shade was hastily snatched down.

Miles holstered his gun and walked back to the hotel, taking the chair he had left less than half an hour before. He was sitting like that when Sheriff Campbell pushed through the lobby door.

"A man was killed in front of Flo Damon's," he said. "People say you did it."

"People," Miles replied, "will also tell you that Wyatt Kane fired the first two shots."

"How do you know it was Kane?" the sheriff asked. "You didn't go over and look at him."

"Just an idea," Miles told him dryly.

The sheriff, worried and hesitant, said, "Well, if he shot first. . . ."

At eight o'clock the next morning Miles left the hotel and walked across to the court house. Later he knocked at the door of Sherman's office, went inside without waiting for an invitation.

Sherman said, "It was a mistake to send one man after you. Next time I'll know better."

Miles sat down, keenly attentive to Sherman's hands. "I have just made a will—witnessed and recorded at the court house—leaving my property to Miss Leslie Townes, just in case anything happens to me."

Sherman's pale eyes darkened a little. "That was smart," he admitted. "All right, what do you want?"

Miles said, "Half of Sand Basin—for a ninety-nine year lease on my spring."

Suddenly Sherman smiled. "We'll get along, me and you. Let's draw up the contract."

He wrote the agreement, made a duplicate while Miles read the original. Both

men affixed their signatures and Miles put one copy in his money belt.

"I'll order the dynamite tomorrow," Sherman said. "It will be here in two weeks and I'll have Mexican laborers ready by that time."

Miles left Sherman's place and in an hour he had bought a horse, picked up his warbag and was riding the trail to Dragoon Pass.

In mid-afternoon he dismounted beside the big spring. This point was above the valley's heat and he stretched out on the ground and rested. Yet there was in him an alertness so habitual that he heard the approaching horse while it was afar off.

When he saw that the rider was Leslie Townes he stood up and waited for her.

She dismounted and leaned against a nearby boulder. "I was in the south field and saw you ride up this way. Father and I want you to have supper with us. Please come."

Miles' loneliness suddenly became a physical pain, a hunger deepened by this offer of friendship. Yet he shied away with a deliberate untruth.

"Sorry, but I'm going back to town."

"Then come tomorow—it's Sunday—and spend the day with us."

Miles said, "There's no call for you to feel grateful to me for buying your land."

"It isn't merely gratitude." She paused, a little unsure of herself. "Must I have a particular reason for liking a person?"

"It seems to me," said Miles, "that you have more reason to *dislike* me."

"I did, at first. I thought you were heartless and cruel. But that was before I understood certain things about you."

"What things?"

She hesitated. "That—that, you're lonely and have had some experiences that have made you bitter. . . . That you stand apart because you have no faith in other men. There was a girl, too, wasn't there?"

"Yes," Miles admitted, "but that's been a long time ago. . . . There's never been another."

She smiled, deepening the dimple in her cheek. "Our wheat crop failed one year," she said, "but we didn't stop planting wheat." She stood up." I—I'd better be riding toward home."

Miles returned her smile and there came to him the realization that there was something fine and distinctive about this girl; all that was decent in him rebelled at the idea of hurting her unnecessarily.

"There's nothing for you to gain in being friendly with me, only something to regret before many weeks have passed."

She said, "Friendship is not figured as profit or loss. It's something you give to a person—and hope to get back in kind." She swung up to her saddle and turned the horse. "Good-bye, until tomorrow."

Miles lay in his blankets that night, looking at the stars and listening to the small nocturnal noises of the hills.

He thought of how sure Leslie had been about the virtues of friendship "It is something you give to a person. . . ." Then he remembered Jason Quade and Charley Bateman, who had been friends; remembered Kate, who had said, "I'll wait for you," but had married Tom Barfield. . . .

WHEN he rode down to the valley the next morning, Will Townes was on the ranch house porch. He and Miles sat there a while talking, and presently Leslie came out and joined them.

Color deeper than the usual healthy glow was in her cheeks and her high good humor instantly brightened the conversation. Listening to her, Miles laughed aloud, the sound falling strangely upon his own ears.

After a while the bell of the little church in Salvation Valley rang. Townes glanced at Miles obliquely.

"Like to drive down and hear the sermon?"

"It would be a chance to meet the people who are to be your neighbors," Leslie suggested quickly.

Miles sensed that she was eager for him to go. He said, "I wouldn't mind; it's been a long time since I've been inside a church."

They drove through the valley in Townes' wagon and when Miles helped Leslie down over the front wheel, her fingers were firm and strong against his own. For a moment they stood like that, then she said, "Thank you," and turned away toward the church.

Townes and Miles went over to the lone cottonwood in the churchyard, and the men gathered there stopped their talk to hear Miles' name and to shake hands with him.

Sam Rawles, young and impetuous, said, "Wyatt Kane got what he deserved. If Sherman's other men take it up, I'm one that's ready to help you."

Miles said coldly, "I won't need any help, mister."

"A man don't keer fer strangers poking into his affairs, Sammy," old Hunter Boyd interposed. "Anyhow, 'tain't no fit subject fer Sunday."

The other men nodded and Miles realized that they were accepting him as a friend. This thought warmed him and he said to Rawles, "I meant no offense, and held out his hand."

Sam grinned. "None taken; I talk too much anyhow."

Voices inside the church raised in the opening staza of When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, and the men moved to the building and went inside.

The minister read a text and began the sermon. His voice ran on monotonously and Miles heard little of what he said. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, it was not until the benediction was being pronounced that any of the words held his attention.

". . . makes us thankful for this valley: for its fertile soil which enables us to make honest livings and for the opportunity to live here among good, God-fearing people. . . ."

Memory bridged a far interval and it was almost as if Miles heard his own mother speak again: "A home and its comforts, peace and security—those are the things every man wants, son, sooner or later."

Outside the church, people lingered a while to talk. Leslie took Miles among these groups and thus he met Granny Coleman, an old woman, small and stooped.

"Always glad to welcome a young stranger to the valley," she said. "Me and my husband settled it and named it Salvation, for that's what it was to us.

"We were a-traveling westward, thinking like fools of nothing but Californey gold. Apaches killed one of our mules and burned the wagon and everything else that we had. We dug water ditches and broke fields with one mule and a wooden-p'inted plow. Yet when Caleb died we had the best ranch in this country."

She laughed and her glance lifted, as if she looked beyond the high blue of the sky. "We had a full life and a good one—better'n anything we could have bought with Californey gold."

Hunter Boyd and his family went home with the Townes for dinner, and during the afternoon some young people dropped in, some remaining for Sunday night supper. So it was that Miles did not find himself alone with Leslie until after Will Townes had said good-night.

Miles said, "I must go," and Leslie walked out to the porch with him.

"I once believed," Miles told her, "that men do not change except to get worse. What do you think?"

"There's one particular thing that can change any man—and never for the worse."

"What?" he asked.

She said, "That's a word that has not passed between us yet," and turned to go back into the house.

"Wait, Leslie. If a man did change, would that wipe out what lay behind him and give him a chance to start over again?"

She said, "With me it would. Good-night, Miles."

He walked out to the corral, caught his horse and rode back to the spring. The long, lonely years crowded about him, dark and empty and bitter with a sense of loss and regret.

"Mother was right," he said aloud. "I went out looking for trouble and I found it. I trusted nobody and nobody trusted me. I gave nothing and received nothing."

Shortly before noon the next day, he dropped his reins at the big Rock hitch-rack and went inside.

Sherman was at the bar and Miles said, "Like to see you a minute."

Sherman turned away to his office. Miles followed and closed the door. Sherman struck a match to light his cigar.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I want back your copy of our agreement," said Miles. "I've changed my mind about diverting the spring."

Sherman dropped the match. "This is child's talk. A man don't back down on a deal."

Miles said, "I want the agreement," speaking softly and gently and with a lack of emphasis which warned Sherman.

"You're a fool, Granberry. My men are outside; you'd never leave this office alive."

"You wouldn't be around to know about that."

The smooth, toneless run of his voice was a language Sherman understood. Small beads of perspiration dampened the saloon owner's forehead. His entire manner changed.

"Somebody is making a sucker of you. I think I know who it is. There's a fortune in this deal of ours. You could get away from sage and sand and cactus; you could buy a dozen women."

Miles said, "I'm not a patient man," and hot points of light began rising to the surface of his eyes.

"Wait," Sherman said. "Wait, you fool."

He took an iron box from the desk and unlocked it; got the agreement and gave it to Miles.

Miles put the contract in his shirt pocket, reached over and lifted Sherman's twin derringers. "You're going past your men with me—I'll lead my horse and we'll walk along, nice and friendly-like."

They went through the saloon, got the horse and moved northward along the street. A woman left the Emporium and came toward them.

She stopped in front of Miles. "You remember me, no?"

He saw that there was something vaguely familiar about her. She was tall and dark and once had been beautiful. She carried a light coat over her left arm, her right hand thrust inside its folds.

Before Miles could answer her question, she said, "My brother, he follow a friend of mine into the hills where he go to meet two compadres to divide dinero made in running guns to Mexico. He find two of the bodies where wild peegs have deeg them up from shallow graves. One of these was Jonas Quade. I am Dolores—you remember, señor?—Dolores, who loved heem!"

She jerked a revolver from the folds of the coat and fired, standing so close that the blast of the gun drove Miles back a step.

He felt no pain, just a dull, spreading numbness. He swayed and pitched forward, hitting the street on his hands and knees and was like that for a moment. Then strength ebbed out of his arms and there was the dry, earthy taste of dust in his mouth.

He heard the woman scream, "By the Holy Virgin, I swore to follow heem and keel heem!"

He remembered Hack Sherman murmuring, "A little bad luck, friend."

He felt Sherman's hands slip into his pocket and take out the contract. He tried to resist, but blackness rolled up in a great, smothering wave and engulfed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown for Salvation Valley

CONSCIOUSNESS came back to Miles as light gradually approaching from a far distance. A room.... Clean, cool sheets, and soft fingers pushing the hair back from his temples.

"You're better," Leslie Townes whispered. "The fever is broken and you're better."

"Yes," he said, and almost immediately fell into a quiet, natural sleep.

When he awoke he was hungry and returning strength coursed all through his body. Leslie came to the door, saw that he was awake and brought in broth and thin, hard-baked bread and coffee.

Miles saw that her eyes were dull and tired. A sudden thought came to him. "How long have I been like this, Leslie?"

"Four days," she told him. "We heard of your trouble and drove to town and brought you here in the wagon."

"You've been with me night and day. You're tired. . . ."

In a distant and impersonal tone, she said, "It wasn't anything—no more than we'd do for any man badly hurt."

She picked up the tray and left the room and he lay there, perplexed and distressed by this change in her manner.

Will Townes brought his meals the next day and he did not see Leslie again until late afternoon. She came in, spoke to him coolly and began straightening the covers.

"Something's wrong," he said. "Tell me, Leslie, what is it?"

She stared out the window; spoke slowly and distinctly. "We thought you were going to die and felt that we should notify your people. I opened your money belt to see if there were letters or anything to help us with that. I found the contract leasing the spring to Hack Sherman."

He raised himself to his elbow. "That's true, but I went to—"

She made a peremptory gesture. "This is hard for me to say. Please don't interrupt.

"I told you that we could take a day and use it for a beginning and that I would not look back of it. But I was mistaken, Miles. I said that I was going to be your friend and I was wrong about that, too. I couldn't—couldn't like you, knowing that you had deliberately ruined our friends and neighbors." Her voice broke and she ran out of the room, heedless to his frantic calls.

Darkness settled over the valley and Miles waited in vain to hear the sound of her footsteps again. Just before dawn, he dropped into the restless sleep of exhaustion.

He awoke with a start and saw that the sun was high against the east windows. A Mexican woman stood by the bed.

"Call Miss Townes," Miles told her.

"The señorita ees gone. She leave me to look after you."

"Gone!"

"*Si.* To Mesa Norte to catch the noon stage."

Miles threw aside the covers.

"But the medico," the Mexican woman protested, "he say you stay in bed."

"To hell with the doctor!" Miles retorted. "Get my clothes."

He walked away from the house unsteadily; by the time he reached the corral, his breathing was quick and ragged. A saddled horse was hitched to the bars and he pulled himself up to the saddle.

Townes came running out of the barn. "What are you doing out of bed? You'll kill yourself."

"That should make no difference to you," Miles replied, "since you found out about my agreement with Sherman."

"You bought my land and paid for it, fair and square," said Townes. "What you do with it is your own business. But you should have told Leslie, son. You saw that she liked you—you knew how it was going to be."

"But I *didn't* know," Miles protested. "As soon as I found out, I went to Sherman and made him give up his copy of the contract. But he got it back after the woman shot me."

Townes shook his head. "Then that's all there is to it; he'll never let you take it away from him again."

"He's just a man," Miles muttered and swung the horse toward Mesa Norte.

That ride tested all his strength and fortitude. At times he turned dizzy and blind, then again it seemed that he and the horse floated along without movement or sound.

He passed a wagon, and the Mexican driver said, "So much tequila in the heat of the day ees not good, ees eet, señor?"

Presently his brain cleared and he considered Mesa Norte and the guards who were sure to be protecting Hack Sherman. He knew that he had almost no chance at all, and so began regarding this day with stoic fatalism, dedicating it wholly to one purpose.

Abruptly a shrewd thought presented itself. He stopped the horse and sat there a moment, then turned back up the trail.

When he met the oncoming wagon, he told the driver, "Get down and take off your clothes."

The Mexican stared at him. "You're dronk, señor. I—"

Miles whipped a bullet close to the man's ear and he instantly rolled down from the wagon and began undressing.

Miles dismounted and removed his own clothes, gave these to the Mexican and started him walking westward across the desert. He released the horse and let it gallop back toward Townes' ranch.

He put on the Mexican's clothes and climbed into the wagon, tilting the big sombrero low against the glare of the sun.

Like that he came to Mesa Norte and went boldly along the main street. Across from the Big Rock, two men lounged beneath a juniper tree as if they had been there a long time. Two others stood just outside the saloon doors, their watchfulness poorly concealed.

Miles turned in at the alley beyond the Big Rock and stopped back of the building. He hitched the team and used that moment to locate the guards stationed there.

Staking everything on boldness, he made no effort to avoid the guards. Stooped and walking with the slow gait of an old man, he brushed past them, said. *"Como 'sta, señores?"* and went in through the rear entrance of the saloon.

At the door of the private office he paused, then opened it and stepped inside.

Sherman was standing at the north window. He turned, recognized Miles, and

The money we invest today in a U. S. War Savings Bond may mean that one extra bomb to destroy a Jap warship—and save the lives of our friends and relatives who help fly our bombers! Buy regularly each pay-day!

saw the cocked revolver in his hand.

He swallowed. "I—"

Miles moved closer. "You know what I want. Get it quick!"

Sherman understood that this was no time for talk. Death, certain and sudden, was imminent, and without a word he took the iron box from the desk and unlocked it.

Miles' endurance had spent itself. Now, within sight of his goal, strength failed him. Black spots began floating before his face. He swayed and staggered, his feet scraping against the floor.

Sherman heard that and wheeled about, the contract in his hand. He said, "Ah," and his fingers moved swiftly to his vest pocket.

Miles realized that the muzzle of his own gun was sinking. He tried to lift it, but a weak trembling ran through him and the weapon dropped from his hand.

Sherman's derringer spat out a flat, thunderous report, but Miles was falling and the bullet went above him. Sherman jerked out the other derringer; his thumb fumbled at the small hammer. . . .

★

MILES was crumpled down across his own gun and the derringer blast, so close to his ears, yelled out to him a warning in an old and familiar language. Instinctively he groped for his revolver and found it. In a last desperate effort he swung it up and fired.

The bullet drove into Sherman's chest just beneath the big diamond he wore in his tie. He made one final and futile effort to cock the derringer, then slipped down to the floor.

The contract lay where he had dropped it and Miles took a match from his pocket, struck it, and touched it to the paper. It flared into instant flame and there came to Miles the illusion that he was lying in his blankets beside some campfire.

He drew a weary breath and put his head down on his arm. . . .

After a while, he became aware of voices and realized that men were all about him, filling the room.

Will Townes was saying, "You fellows are hired gun-slingers and Sherman's dead. There's nobody to pay you for killing Granberry."

Miles opened his eyes. Townes stood above him, facing the other men. There was a noise at the door and Sheriff Campbell came in; with him were Sam Rawles and Hunter Boyd and half a dozen others from Salvation Valley. They carried shotguns.

The sheriff said, "Yes, Hack Sherman's dead. I reckon now that I've been a weak fool. Townes just rode in with these men from the valley. They're backing me and I'm cleaning up Mesa Norte, here and now. There ain't nothing left for you boys, so pack up and start riding."

"I reckon you're right, Sheriff," one of the men admitted. "We work for gun-wages; it ain't nothing personal with us. Let's slope, boys."

Townes helped Miles to the hotel and got him in bed. Sam Rawles brought a doctor to the room.

Miles shook his head at them. "I've got to find Leslie."

"She's on her way to our friends in Julesburg," Townes explained. "We'll write her, and—"

"I'll catch the next stage," Miles interrupted.

"You'll lie down and rest," the doctor interposed sternly. "You're in no condition to ride a stage."

Townes saw the rebellious set of Miles' features. "Look, son," he said, "I'll catch the stage and go after Leslie and bring her home. Now you rest a while and I'll drive you out to the ranch so that Camita and her husband can look after you while I'm gone."

"You'll do that for me?" Miles asked,

and when Townes nodded and smiled at him, he relaxed against the pillows. . . .

It was late afternoon when he got up and went down to the street. Rest had strengthened him and he climbed up to the wagon seat without help. This was a little below the hotel, and he waited there while Townes went back to look for Rawles.

The stage from the south rolled in and stopped at the hotel. Two men got out and one of them turned and helped a lady down from the step. Miles stood up, then dropped back to the wagon seat.

"It's Leslie," he said aloud, and suddenly there came to him a warmth and a sense of complete well being.

Will Townes had seen Leslie, too. He ran down the hotel steps and stood there a moment, talking to her.

Then Leslie started walking along the street, coming faster and faster until she was breathless and flushed when she got to where Miles was waiting for her.

Oblivious to staring eyes, she came straight to his arms and put her face against his chest.

"Riding along on the stage," she said, "I got to thinking, and I knew you couldn't do it, darling. When we met the other stage, I got off and came back."

He lifted her face and kissed her. "Why were you so sure, Leslie?"

"Because I knew you loved me—and that we were starting a new day together. . . ."

"I'm going to give you a deed to the spring," he said, "to protect your neighbors—"

"*Our* neighbors," she amended, "and there'll be no question of deeds between you and father and me. The ranch will be our home. . . . And you and I will stand on the porch at night and look at all the little lights in the valley. We'll know that our love and happiness are solidly built; that they're secure and lasting, and guarded by good and loyal friends."

"Salvation Valley," he said softly. "Granny Coleman named it well, and she was wise enough to see that it offered something more precious than her Californey gold."

His arms tightened and drew Leslie closer. "To me, who had nothing, it has given all that a man can want."

THE END

Says Everybody is HYPNOTIZED

A strange method of mind and body control, that leads to immense powers never before experienced, is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report relief of long standing illness. Others acquire superb bodily strength and vitality, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country, rarely visited by outsiders, and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western world.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind-power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth, from conquest of sickness to the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep by the suggestions of associates, by what we read, and by various experiences. To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

A nine-thousand word treatise, revealing the startling results of this system, is now being offered free to anyone who quickly sends his name and address. Write promptly to the address below, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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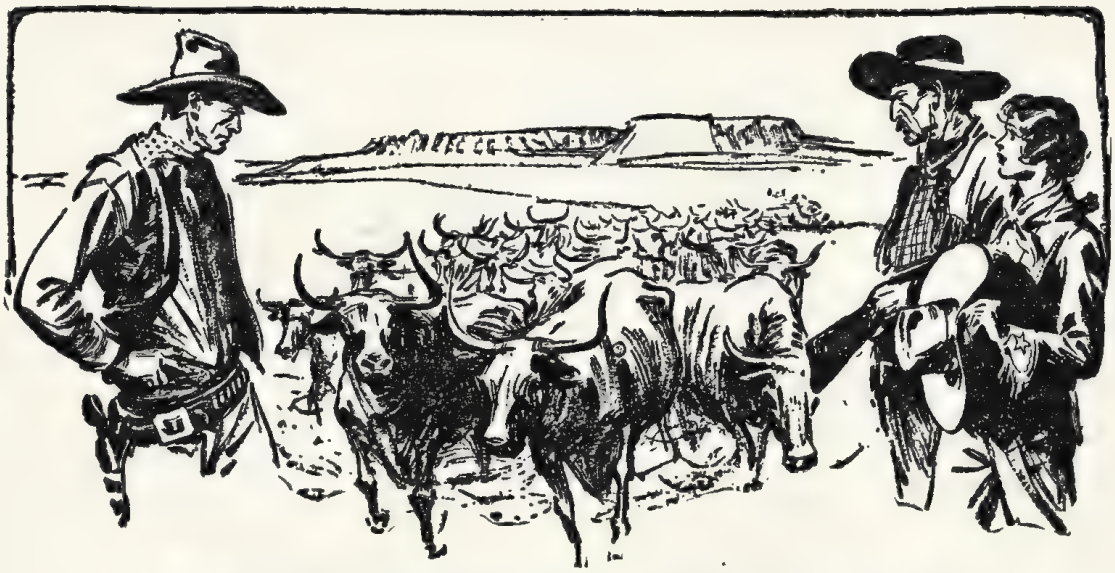

Up the Trail

"IF A nation values anything more than freedom, it will lose that freedom, and the irony of it is that if it is comfort or money that it values more, it will lose that too."

IT MAY seem strange that these very important words by the English author, Somerset Maugham, are quoted here, in a magazine devoted solely to Western frontier fiction. But if we think about that quotation for a minute, it isn't so strange. Because the very thing that we ourselves, our friends, our brothers and our sons are fighting desperately to keep at this moment—our freedom as a nation—is, on a minor scale, the same thing that cattlemen, miners, and honest frontier townsmen, have been fighting for since men first settled beyond the Mississippi.

Remember the old phrase about a cowpuncher selling his saddle? He might have to part with his gun; go hungry and thirsty, even be set afoot, but a man's saddle meant something that nothing else could replace. And why not?

He spent most of his waking hours in it; it was "broken in" to his own way of sitting a horse. At night, it served as a pillow out under the stars on the open range. That kack was almost as much a part of him as his skin. It symbolized—though perhaps a cowpuncher didn't exactly think of it in that way—his own individuality, his own independence, his means of drifting yonderly to see what was on the other side of the sky-line. That was freedom.

"Benedict Arnold was an American general who sold his saddle," one Western schoolboy said, and his meaning as well as his condemnation was clear. For that traitor, history tells us, lived to know what that phrase would later mean throughout the West. Alone and neglected, he was despised by his former comrades, and coldly ignored by the very men from whom he'd accepted his Judas wages. He spent those last miserable days in London, a man without friends. A man without a country.

Down near the Mexican-Arizona border, there was a town that "sold its saddle. . . ." "Tougher than a boot!" was what the cow-country said of the little trail-town of Alamos, Arizona. But it was not only tough; it was a town that had lost its soul—a renegade town; a traitor town to every decent human instinct or honest impulse.

A deadline ran down the middle of its one dusty street, a bloodstained boundary that split the place wide open, guarded and kept on one side by Black Jack Spaden. It was said that he never told a lie, never dealt a crooked card—and never gave a man he disliked an even break to go for his gun! The other side of the street was the territory of Judge Barbee, gray-haired, quiet and outwardly respectable, but who was, in his own way, fully as sinister as the immaculately dressed gambler and his hired killer-marshal.

Between those two was bitter, smouldering hatred, but its flame was always held in check because each realized his dependence upon the other to carry on their pardnership of loot and death. They were in brief, using that town as headquarters for the greatest cattle-steal ever attempted along that strip of border.

Men's lives then were measured by the covert nod of Black Jack Spaden's head; or the first impression they made upon the cold-eyed murderer who flaunted a law-badge. . . .

Walt Coburn, in this latest novel, has brought back to vigorous life all the untamed violence, the stark brilliant color and adventurous drama that was part and parcel of the raw, untamed West. "Tougher Than A Boot!", along with other novels by Robert E. Mahaffay, Stone Cody, Fred Gipson and other Western writing men will appear in the October issue. . . .

. . . . which will be published September 4th!

(Continued from page 8)

skill and daring that it was considered a matter of prestige among the young fellows to boast of the narrow escapes they'd had while riding with him. And, while each trip was successful, there is no record that any man rode twice as a passenger with Lightning Buck Billings.

Lightning Buck made his last ride one day when, called upon to substitute for another driver, he did not have time to load on his accustomed liquid freight before starting out.

Days later, his body and the wrecked remains of the coach were found at the bottom of a gorge, three hundred feet below the narrow road. Reverently the boys of the camp carried Lightning back, buried him with his silver-handled whip in one hand and a full bottle of brandy in the other, and carved on his gravestone, "Lightning Buck Billings, Wells, Fargo driver. Killed August 2, 1855, by that last drink he didn't have time to take! Here's to you, Lightning!"

I remember finding in a trunk not many years ago, a faded time-yellowed newspaper clipping from the Virginia City Enterprise of 1883 which formed the obituary notice of Hank Monk—the most fabulous ribbon-popper who ever tooled a team in California—which seems to me to be, in its way, as classic a bit of Western literature as was ever written:

Hank Monk. The famous stage driver is dead. He has been on the down grade for some time. On Wednesday, his foot lost its final hold on the brake and his coach could not be stopped until, battered and broken on a sharp turn, it went over into the black, deep canyon which we call Death.

In his way, Hank Monk was a character. In the old days, before the leathers under his coach were soaked in alcohol, there was no better balanced head than his. There was an air about him which his closest friends could not understand. There was something that seemed to say that stage driving was not his

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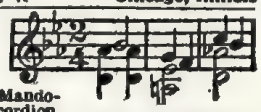

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intended walk; that if he pleased, there were other things, even more difficult than handling six wild horses, which he could do quite as well.

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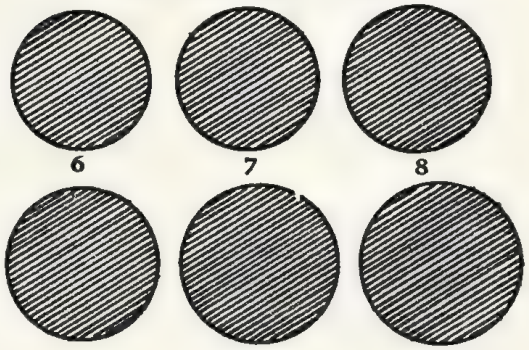

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fixed the cause. The effect had to be. He has often driven from the summit of the Sierra down to the valley, a distance of ten miles, in forty-five minutes.

Other drivers have done as well, the only difference being that with the others it was a matter of strain on eye and hand and arm and foot; with Monk it was a matter of course. He was to stage driving what the papers say Edwin Booth was to Hamlet: "It was not played but lived."

Good for you, Mr. Newhall! I think, however, that if you look back in this magazine, you'll find that we've given a pretty fair proportion of credit to the men who did not occupy themselves exclusively with the cattle-range or trail-drives.

How about it, you hombres around the Branding Corral? Or should we open up a sort of annex for the miners and buckskin poppers, and call it Nugget Gulch?

Now here's a question that's going to take some answering, and right here's where the call goes out for volunteers, though—like anyone else—we're entitled to our opinion which we won't be bashful about giving!

Who can help out *Mr. F. X. Mulholland* of Texarkana, with some information that has started many a hot augurment around bunkhouse stoves as far as fifty years back. And, so far as I know, this same augurment has never been settled yet!

Dear Strawboss:

I'd like to know who, in your opinion or in the opinion of the bunch around the Branding Fire, was the best gunman—either lawman or outlaw—that lived during the days when ol' Colonel Colt's famous six-shooter played such an important part in the West.

I'm too young to have seen any of the great gun-fighters first hand, but when I was a button, I used to listen to some of the men who claimed they'd seen such famous gents as Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp and a few more. And they'd argue about which was fastest on the draw and who would have won a gun-fight if such a thing had ever occurred between those men. Nobody I ever know had known or seen Billy the Kid or any of the well-known outlaws, but I want to know which was considered the best all-round gunman.

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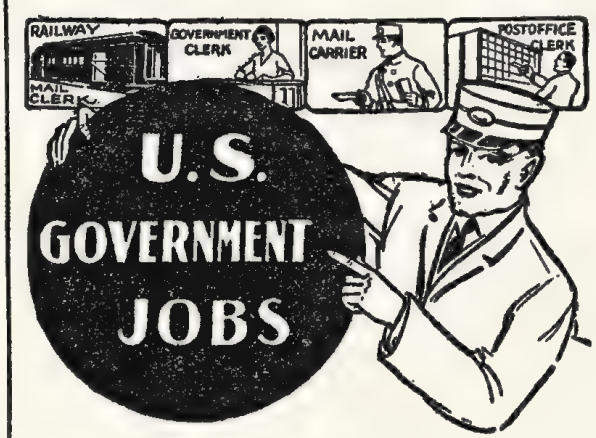

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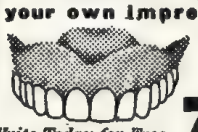

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Just to start the ball rolling, we'll say here and now that our vote goes to Wyatt Earp on all counts. Certainly, I doubt if anyone—lawman or outlaw—could get the edge on him in sheer gunman guts, as he proved many times before coming to Tombstone, as law officer in such roaring towns as Wichita, Dodge, and other places.

Bill Hickok, while undoubtedly a picturesque figure and a brave man, has been surrounded for years by an aura of glamor which has been proved, during the last decade or so, to have been largely fictional—especially his famous battle with the McCanleses at Rock Creek Ranch.

Wild Bill was as great a showman as that other Bill, nicknamed Buffalo; and although Hickok's undoubted skill with a six-shooter and equally undoubted courage places him among the great frontier gun-marshals, his reputation nonetheless started with some mighty tall tales he told of his own exploits.

At one time credited with a hundred or so killings, various court records have since proved that he came nowhere near that number.

William MacLeod Raine, famous historian of the frontier, mentions that Hickok slept with a revolver close at hand and crumpled newspapers on the floor to warn him if anyone tried to sneak up and kill him in his sleep.

There may be men still alive who personally knew Billy the Kid—William Bonney, and his record of twenty-one killings has not to my knowledge been disputed. And again there is no question about his nerve, either. He was one tough little hombre, and at the same time, when opportunity arose enjoyed himself quietly at the home of his friends, who numbered some of the most respected ranchers in southern New Mexico at that time. Get his back against the wall, or get him suspicious, and he was as cold-blooded as any rattler, and twice as vicious.

Although he died only about twenty years ago, one of the interesting angles about Wyatt Earp's career is that his reputation—not his gun-skill—is still heatedly argued. If you can find any old residents of Tombstone, where Wyatt and his brothers and Doc Holliday had their famous sixty-second gun-fight in the old

OK Corral with the Clanton faction, you'll likely find that one man will call Wyatt the most brutal sure-thing killer that ever drew a gun, and that same man's neighbor will tell you that Wyatt Earp was the squarest and most honorable peace officer that ever rodded the law in the West.

Augurments like that die hard, and have their basis in the loyalty enjoyed by each warring faction of any turbulent mining or cattle town feud. Certainly I'd say that his courage and sheer fighting guts are notches above those of either Wild Bill Hickok or half a dozen other great gunmen one can mention off-hand.

Bat Masterson, along with Bill Tilghman, was possibly one of the best known and best liked, and the last of the old-time gun-marshals. . . . Bat died at his desk not so many years ago, in a New York newspaper office, after having written the immortal lines: "There are many in this old world of ours who hold that things break about even for all of us. I have observed, for example, that we all get about the same amount of ice. The rich get it in the summer-time and the poor get it in the winter."

It seems strange that the stout, good-natured newspaperman who wrote that was the same one who, some forty years before, had tamed roaring Dodge, as much by his strong will-power and sense of human values perhaps as by his six-shooter.

So, Mr. Mulholland, our vote still goes to Wyatt Earp, deputy U. S. marshal, cool-headed gunman, fugitive from the law—and all-round fighting man!

Any other candidates?

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STAR WESTERN

Last month we told you that *Mr. John Corcoran,* of Minneapolis, wanted to speak a word for what he believes was the toughest cowtown during the great cattle-drive period—Newton, Kansas. So here he is with his story of that famous fight which has gone down in cow-country history as the Newton General Massacre—in which one under-sized little lunger backed against the wall and spread grief, blood and death among nine tough Texas trail-hands!

Gents, Mr. Corcoran. . . . And incidentally the hero of his story might be his own candidate for top-hand gunman!

Dear Strawboss:

We've heard plenty about the wildness of Dodge City, Hayes, Abiline, Baxter Springs and other hell-roaring end-of-trail towns—their booming boothills, their famous lawmen and gun-slinging killers. But I submit that Newton, Kansas, was about the toughest little town that ever had its man for breakfast.

George McCluskie was a big, tough, husky sort of gent who was willing to shoot it out with anyone under any provocation. He was a lawman, and a good one—as he had to be in such a place. His best friend was a thin, emaciated looking youngster who had come from somewhere in the East—a lunger named Jim Riley whom McClusky grubstaked, and who followed the stalwart peace officer around like a pet puppy.

McClusky got into trouble with a Texan named Bailey, and the case was fought out in the municipal court, but was discharged for lack of evidence. Bailey was not content to let that ride, but gibed McClusky later in a bar room. McClusky drew and shot the man dead.

That, however, did not sit so well with a bunch of Texans who had driven a herd up to Newton. They tracked McClusky to a dance-hall, and one in a group of nine men insulted him and drew his gun, and fired. McClusky went down wounded.

However, the nine Texans forgot to figure on the seemingly inoffensive young lunger. The wounding of his friend turned that frail youth into a berserk madman. He grabbed one of McClusky's guns and locked the door to the place, then started on a wholesale massacre. No bullet, it seemed, could touch him while he blazed away, killing or wounding all nine of the Texans.

The strange part of it was that no one, so far as any record goes, knows to this day what became of young Riley. He simply disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him. That, I submit, was one of the strangest battles and one of the most typical of one man fighting against odds in all the history of the untamed West.

(Concluded on page 146)

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(Concluded from page 144)

With many others who are interested in Western history, I'd be very grateful if anyone could give me any idea of what happened to Riley.

We wonder if the fate of that youngster will remain one of the unsolved mysteries of the West, or if anyone does actually know what happened to him.

Remember a little while ago, we heard from Al Carmichael of Chicago, who told of his experiences down near the Arizona-Mexico line, where all the range stands on end, and—according to Mr. Carmichael's way of looking at it—most brush-popping cowboys rig their horses with a double cinch saddle and often breast-straps too when they're on round-up?

Well, here's *Private Leonard D. Little,* who's stationed at Camp Roberts, California, with a come-back to Mr. Carmichael's augurment:

Dear Strawboss:

In the Branding Corral, July issue, I read a letter from Mr. Al Carmichael, and while I admire his sentiments in sticking up for the section of the country which he came from, and the kind of hands they raise there, I'd like to say a few words in disagreement.

I myself come from the Missouri River brakes in central Montana, where they wear both single rig and double rig saddles. Although I've seen bulls, horses, and all kinds of stock roped on the range, I never yet have seen any hand who had to have a harness on a horse before he could rope and hold what he roped, as was the impression I got from Mr. Carmichael's letter.

Also, there are some parts of Wyoming which absolutely not by the most imaginative mind could be called level, and which I will wager is as rough as any country along the Arizona-Mexican border. When he refers to "those Wyoming beef hands," I wonder if he means from all over Wyoming, or just the particular strip he visited.

Yours for the duration—and six months.

Thank you, Private Little! We've not yet heard what part of Wyoming Mr. Carmichael visited, but expect to hear from him on that before long.

We'll keep irons right here in the fire until next month, and we can promise you that we have some tough young augurments ready to slap into our brand!

Salud y pesetas!
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